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PLUS DAVID BRIN INTERVIEWED • ANSIBLE LINK • MUTANT POPCORN • LASER FODDER • BOOK REVIEWS



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EDITORIAL

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About the delay...

We're very sorry about the length of time it's taken this issue to arrive. The print files were handed over on schedule, and the issue was in fact turned around very quickly. Unfortunately there were severe print problems that caused a few pages of the issue to be unreadable, and we decided to reprint it with a different printer, after quickly adding this note of apology.

...this new format...

Many thanks for your opinions on the proposed format changes. These, combined with the overwhelmingly positive comments on the new look issue #29 of our sister magazine *Black Static* (issue #30 out now by the way – the magazines are published at the same time now rather than in alternate months), convinced us that we should go ahead and make the changes, and now rather than later. So, as you can see, the magazine is now slightly more compact, yet with more pages and more content. Some things we haven't quite nailed yet – we're still trying to find a viable way to include a bound-in subscription reminder/order form (there's a list of available *Interzone* subscriptions to the left, but it's always best just to visit the website) – but we'll use the extra space best we can, including this page right here.

As well as allowing us to include more coverage of books and more original fiction, the theory is that the new format better suits the content, and that it's easier to read, handle and store.

As always, please let us know how we're doing, either directly or via the Interaction forum (ttapress.com/forum).

...the Hugo Awards...

Interzone was shortlisted in the Semiprozine category, as it is every year, but we failed to win again, losing out to *Locus*. Thanks to everybody who voted for us, and to Tim Lees, now a resident of Chicago, for offering to collect the award on our behalf. Congratulations to all the winners, listed in *Ansible Link* by Dave Langford (himself a winner, along with his fellow editors John Clute, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight, for *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, Third Edition*).

Ken Liu is another of those who went home with a Hugo, winning in the Short Story category. We happen to have a new story by him in this issue, and a translation by him – of 'The Flower of Shazui' by Chinese author Chen Qiufan – in issue #243, out in November.

...and the forthcoming TTA Novellas imprint

The special pre-publication subscription offer is open a little bit longer, in the hope that yet more *Interzone* readers will want the first five titles for just £25, post-free to anywhere in the world.

The novellas will be published as B-format paperbacks with wrap-around covers. The first, *Eyepennies* by Mike O'Driscoll, has already received some glowing advance praise from the likes of Tim Lebbon, Stephen Volk, Ellen Datlow, Paul Meloy and Alison Littlewood, and is at press now.

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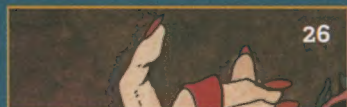
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DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

As Others See Us. 'Lots of its authors, and a slew of its readers, like to think that science fiction sails on the ocean of science, but mostly it just paddles in the shallows of literature.' (Joseph Bottom, *Weekly Standard*) Sometimes it proudly wallows in the gutters of popularity.

Awards. *Hugos.* Novel: Jo Walton, *Among Others*. Novella: Kij Johnson, 'The Man Who Bridged the Mist' (*Asimov's* 10/11). Nov-
elette: Charlie Jane Anders, 'Six Months, Three Days' (Tor.com). Short Story: Ken Liu, 'The Paper Menagerie' (*F&SF* 3/11). Related Work: John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls, Graham Sleight (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, Third Edition*. Graphic Story: Ursula Vernon, *Digger*. Dramatic – Long: *Game of Thrones: Season 1*. Dramatic – Short: *Doctor Who: 'The Doctor's Wife'*. Pro Editor – Long: Betsy Wollheim. Pro Editor – Short: Sheila Williams. Pro Artist: John Picacio. Semiprozine: *Locus*. Fanzine: *SF Signal*. Fancast: *SF Squeecast*. Fan Writer: Jim C. Hines. Fan Artist: Maurine Starkey. John W. Campbell Award: E. Lily Yu. • Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery: Fredric Brown. • Eaton (life achievement): Ray Harryhausen, Stan Lee, Ursula K. Le Guin. • Lambda (LGBT sf/f/ horror): Lee Thomas, *The German*. • Mythopoeic (fantasy). Adult: Lisa Goldstein, *The Uncertain Places*. Children's: Delia Sherman, *The Freedom Maze*. Scholarship – Inklings: Carl Phelpstead, *Tolkien and Wales: Language, Literature and Identity*. Scholarship – Other: Jack Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films*. • Prometheus (libertarian): Delia Sherman, *The Freedom Maze*, and Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (tie). • Pulitzer: the 2012 poetry

winner, Tracy K. Smith's collection *Life on Mars*, has much science and sf content. • Sidewise (alternate history). Long: Ian R. MacLeod, *Wake Up and Dream*. Short: Lisa Goldstein. 'Paradise is a Walled Garden' (*Asimov's* 8/11).

When All Else Fails. Writer-director Judd Apatow on his next film: 'I've covered college, marriage, having a baby, turning 40, and fatal diseases – there's almost nothing left at this point. I'm going to have to switch to science fiction.' (*Entertainment Weekly*)

Ray Bradbury was honoured again by NASA, which announced on his 92nd birthday (22 August) that the touchdown site of the Mars rover Curiosity is named Bradbury Landing. Less respectfully, released 1960s FBI files show that Bradbury was investigated as a possible Communist, an accusation made by B-movie screenwriter Martin Berkeley – who was a card-carrying Party member and denounced 155 Hollywood colleagues, telling the FBI that 'the general aim of these science fiction writers is to frighten the people into a state of paralysis or psychological incompetence bordering on hysteria'. Bradbury received a clean bill of political health. (*Huffington Post*)

Gareth Edwards, director of the new *Godzilla*, reassures those who doubt the plausibility of a huge city-smashing reptile: 'There's nothing sci-fi about this movie. It's very grounded, very realistic.' (io9)

We Are Everywhere. Interviewee: '...the concept of the monomyth that Joseph Campbell put forward.' Presenter: 'Just to clarify, that's the famous science fiction editor Joseph Campbell?' Interviewee: 'Uh yes, that's right.' (Radio 4, *Material*

World) Long-time readers remember the uproar when Campbell changed his magazine title from *Astounding Monomyths* to *Monolog*.

Stanley Schmidt retired after spending (as did John W. Campbell) 34 years as editor of *Analogue*. Trevor Quachri, current managing editor of both *Analogue* and *Asimov's*, will take over.

Brian Aldiss revealed his 1970s pickup technique. Having sat in a train opposite a young woman reading his raunchy *The Hand-Reared Boy*: "'You're reading a book I wrote. Do you like it? ... Let's go and have a coffee, or go to your place?'" A generous offer, I thought! But she was pretty snooty about it, or shy.' (*Independent*)

Michael Swanwick was inordinately pleased by this definition in a dictionary of Newfoundland English: 'george martin: an ankle-high rubber boot with lacing. Also known as rubber lumps.'

Ursula K. Le Guin remarks that in recent years the publishing industry – specifically, Harcourt – has tried to tinker with the basics of her novels: 'There was an increasing pressure to make them more like Harry Potter.' (*Wired* interview) Imagine that: a Le Guin YA story about a young hero growing up in a school for wizards!

Controversy Corner. *Weird Tales* editor Marvin Kaye reacted to the online fracas about perceived racism in Victoria Foyt's self-published dystopian novel *Revealing Eden* by announcing that *WT* would excerpt chapter 1 of this 'thoroughly non-racist book'. This led to an epic storm of criticism and, five days later, a *WT* volteface with publisher John Harlacher not



only cancelling Kaye's decision but deleting his website post. People had kept screenshots. • F. Paul Wilson plunged Facebook into war by linking to a website about the coming TV series *The Fixer* – based on Jon F. Merz's urban fantasies – with the comment 'Let's rip off Jack, shall we?' Merz disliked the insinuation that his 'Fixer' vampire hunter was stolen from Wilson's 'Repairman Jack', and asked for a retraction and apology; a loyal Wilson fan denounced Merz as a pirate; and so on.

Peter Jackson's and Warner Bros' plan to expand the *Hobbit* project from two films to three – using spare *Lord of the Rings* material since 'There's so much good stuff in the appendices that we haven't been able to squeeze into these movies' (*Telegraph* – was described by *The Independent* as 'stretching an ant's arse over a rain barrel'.

Thog's Masterclass. *Irresistible Narrative Hook Dept.* 'I wonder how long it will be before that name pronounced soundlessly in the deep silence of my mind will fail to unleash in me such floods of nostalgia, rent through and through with fear and painful confusion, yet linked indissolubly with my memory of the strangest days I have ever known.' (Flora Armytage, *Sebastian*, 1946: first sentence) • *Eyeballs in the Sky*. 'Her eyes were rocking with water.' (Sarah Hall, *Daughters of the North*, 2007) • 'The solid steel was back in those watery eyes.' (Julie Hyzy, 'Five Sorrowful Mysteries' in *At the*

R.I.P.

Tage Eskestad (1920–2012), Danish author of several sf novels 1967–1981 – notably *Flyngninge fra Himlen* (1973), an sf interpretation of *The Book of Enoch*, and *Matriarkatet* (1975), a post-apocalyptic dystopia – has died at age 92.

Harry Harrison (1925–2012), who for *Interzone* readers needs no introduction, died on 15 August; he was 87. Following early work as a comics artist and magazine editor, Harry was best known for his fiction, launching well-loved series characters in *Deathworld* (1960), *The Stainless Steel Rat* (1961) and *Bill the Galactic Hero* (1965); notable standalones include *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966, unfaithfully filmed as *Soylent Green*), *Captive Universe* (1969) and *A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!* (1972). He edited many anthologies, both solo and in collaboration with Brian Aldiss; he entered the SF Hall of Fame in 2004 and was made a SFWA Grand Master in 2009.

Margaret Mahy (1936–2012), NZ author of 160 children's and YA books including many supernatural fantasies, died on 23 July; she was 76. Her numerous awards include two Carnegie Medals – she was

Scene of the Crime, 2008, ed. Dana Stabenow) • *Dept of Early Rising*. 'Liam gave up trying to scrub his brain awake through his scalp.' (Dana Stabenow, 'On the Evidence', *Ibid*) • *Self-Introduction Dept.* 'As she peered up at him, Jupiter suddenly realized she was a Gypsy. Her first words confirmed this. "I am Zelda, the Gypsy," she said.' (Robert Arthur, *The Mystery of the Talking Skull*, 1969) • *Dept of Can This Be*

the first Carnegie winner from outside Britain – and the Hans Christian Andersen Award.

Adam Niswander (1946–2012), US author of *The Charm* (1993) and several other Lovecraftian and dark-fantasy novels, died on 12 August aged 66.

Josepha Sherman (1946–2012), US sf/fantasy author and editor whose debut (solo) novel *The Shining Falcon* (1989) won the Compton Crook award, died on 23 August aged 65. Other works included a *Star Trek* trilogy with Susan Schwartz and the hefty *Storytelling: An Encyclopedia of Mythology and Folklore*.

Roland C. Wagner (1960–2012), French sf author and anthologist whose first novel appeared in 1987 and whose alternate-history magnum opus *Rêves de Gloire* (2011) won several awards, died in a car accident on 5 August; he was 51.

Gore Vidal (1925–2012), major US author and polemicist who made regular use of sf and fantasy devices, died on 31 July; he was 86. Works of genre importance include *Messiah* (1954), *Visit to a Small Planet* (1957 play), *Kalki* (1978), *Duluth* (1983), *Live From Golgotha* (1992) and *The Smithsonian Institution* (1998).

Euphemism? 'Jimmy looked over Nadine's head at Annabeth and Sara, felt all three of them blow through his chest, fill him up, and turn him to dust at the same time.' (Dennis Lehane, *Mystic River*, 2001) • *Fruity Dept.* 'He picked up his coat from the back of the sofa and moved to the door, feeling distinctly like an ambulant and green soft fruit.' (Keith McCarthy, *The Silent Sleep of the Dying*, 2004)



DEBBIE URBANSKI

WONDER

I

My mom has a friend named Alex who lives on the other side of the phone. He wants to know everything about her. He asks what she ate for breakfast, and what shirt she wore, and the color of her underwear. She sings him bits of funny songs and her voice gets soft when she sings, I pretend she's singing to me. Alex knows about our private things because my mom's told him. She used to be someone else. We used to live somewhere else. We used to live in a valley with a lot of other people, where my mom wore a brown dress every day until it smelled, and I wore a button shirt and brown pants like my dad and Jacob, who is my brother. I don't like it when my mom talks about where we came from. She makes my dad and our old home sound stupid. "The stupid shit you do when you're young," she says to Alex. She forgets about the water pump my dad pushed down and up and down whenever we got thirsty, and the four red chickens we



chased around the yard, and how every day little girls braided my mom's hair so she looked pretty. I think she should tell Alex about the day we left, because that day my mom woke us before the sun came out, and Jacob and I ate pretzels, a whole bag, we never got to eat pretzels, and in the sky I saw every star, but my mom never tells that story. Instead, she says everybody had to wash in each other's dirty bath water. Also she says my dad was crazy, he woke us up whenever he wanted, even at two in the morning he woke us up and made us go downstairs to listen to him talk.

My dad has green eyes and brown hair and smaller hairs that come out of his ears and his nose. When he blows his nose, he sounds like a funny animal, I used to hear him through the walls in the morning. In my head, I can see my dad holding a cat and kneeling, so I can pet the cat behind its ears. If I want to remember these things, I do it secretly, because if I tell, my mom says I'm remembering it wrong. When we left our old home, my dad was asleep in his bed and my mom drove for a long time, until the stars went away and the sky turned different colors. Jacob asked a lot of questions, like where we were going, and where my dad was, and what my dad was doing, and when we'd get there, and when we'd turn around, until my mom shouted to just shut up, shut up! She was holding onto the steering wheel very tight. We drove away from our old home in winter. That meant everything was white.

I like the winter because snow covers things up. The snow hides the brown roof of our new house, and our bum wheelbarrow, and the chair with three legs, and the ugly dirt in the yard. Our new home looks like our old home in the winter, because in winter, no matter where you are, all the trees in the woods go to sleep. After the snow falls down, my mom's customers don't come, instead my mom builds a fire in our family room, and we sit by the fire. My mom helps dead people talk to living people, that's her job now. She works in the back room with the red curtains. In our old home, people thought a voice in somebody's head was wrong, it had to be beaten out, but my mom doesn't believe this anymore. My mom tells Alex there's a lot of gray to the truth.

Every day in winter my mom wishes there are

more customers but I don't, because when there are no customers, my mom makes me and Jacob apple cider from a powder, then she reads us books. My favorite book is about the knights who help people. They ride their horses all around, saving ladies from monsters, and they stay very busy. I like those stories but Jacob pretends not to listen, he says he's too old for made up things. My mom's voice is warm and I put my head on her shoulder. I ask her, is this what they sound like? I'm talking about the dead people in her head. She's told me before, you can hear them or you don't, so I can't ever hear the voices even if I'm quiet. My mom says no, it's not like someone reading you a story.

Summers are different. Summers are the opposite. There are no fires, no cider, instead there's the mud in our yard, and the broken things in our yard. Our new house is next to the woods and in the summer, I don't go into the woods. The woods are dark and in the dark, people can hide a lot of things in it. My mom says I have an *irrational fear*. She says there are things I should be afraid of but trees are not one of them. When my mom was my age, she wished she could live in the trees. She climbed into them all the time and turned loose branches into swords or she turned a creek into an ocean, she used her imagination to do this. She did not tip toe around the forest like a fraidy cat. "They're only trees, Daniel," she tells me. When Jacob is angry at me, he pushes me into the woods and he makes me stay there until he's counted to 100 very slowly. This is a game he made up. There are animals in the woods that make strange sounds and we can't even see them.

Also in the summer, there's no school. Instead I have to see Jacob every day and also Ida, who lives across the street from us. Ida likes Jacob but not me. She says my mom is full of shit then she spits on my shoes. Every day in summer there are customers who come inside our house and wait on our chairs. They pretend they can't see me. Our family room smells like people's armpits. Nothing bad happens in the winter but bad things happen in the summer, like when Ms Mueller's three dogs got run over, or the other time when the factory closed and Jacob lost his job. Jacob used to make motors on an assembly line, it was a hard job, he said they were complicated motors.

The blues came in the summer too, they crashed down one night in Indiana. This was a bad thing because our planet Earth was crowded, there wasn't any more room on it. Also a lot of people thought the blues meant the world was over. That's what my mom thought. She thought the blues were the sign we were waiting for at our old home, so she woke Jacob up and they crawled into my bed, because if the world died, my mom wanted to hold both our hands in the dark. She says the whole night you could hear people outside screaming. Everybody was afraid. There were fires all over the place and the smoke got into my room and on my sheets and in my hair. Then it was morning. The world was still here. My mom says, "The sun came out and it was this beautiful day. There were all these birds. It was like the birds came from everywhere, they came out of the woods and they decided to sit on all the bushes, and on everybody's roofs. So things didn't end after all."

The blues flew here in their ship from some other place in the universe. You can believe it or not, it's true even if you don't believe it. At first we thought it was pretend too until the blues came to our town on a special bus. I stood next to Jacob on the sidewalk to watch the bus go down our street. Some neighbors took photos though you couldn't see anything, it was just a bus with cloudy windows. Ms Mueller said she heard the blues can make ping pong balls float around their heads just by giving the balls a certain look, and Mr Lucas, Ida's dad, said a lot of good that would do. He said, "How about sending us something we could eat?" The grocery store was out of meat again and there wasn't any eggs or milk to buy either. Jacob said, "I wonder if the blues taste any good?" And everybody laughed, because it was just a joke and we were hungry.

The blues moved into the free apartments near the dump on the other side of town. I wanted a parade, and my mom said she'd like one too but other people weren't in the mood. She talked to Alex on the phone when she thought I was asleep, I heard her say, "This is a fucking miracle!" Then she told Alex how the blues meant things were changing, things had to be changing, how could they not change? And yeah, change was hard for people, everybody wanted things to stay the

same, but a place where nothing ever changed was make believe. Better than the world ending was the world getting better.

We started learning about the blues right away when school started in the fall. Aliens, Mrs Durand told us, meant a *group or culture that came here from far away*. Their home was different than our home, that's all it meant. So everybody who thought aliens would have a lot of arms and solve all our problems, it's their fault they're disappointed.

The blues look kind of like us and they don't have special powers. They're tall and strong and blue and if you bother them, a white mist oozes out of them so they're hard to see. The blue boys aren't allowed to eat much food so their bones stick out, and the blue women have bruises because that's where the blue men hit them. Also they smell bad. All these things are called *cultural differences*. If we say these things are wrong, Mrs Durand says we have *racism* which is not good. A lot of blues aren't friendly or nice, but that's how they are, and Mrs Durand says if you look back at our history, we haven't been very friendly or nice either.

The summer the blues came, we only had two customers a day at our house. That wasn't a lot. Nobody else wanted to come. People in town were scared now of the voices in my mom's head. They weren't scared at first, then the blues came, and they got scared of a lot of things. My mom had an idea though, she thought the blues could be our new customers, she said there sure was enough of them. She put a sign out in our front yard, but then Jacob said can the blues even read? So my mom took down the sign and went over to their apartments. I wanted to go with her and she told me I could the next day, but she was lying, because that night, when she got home, she changed her mind and said I couldn't come. I wanted to know how the blues slept, and where they ate, and what they ate, and if they wore pajamas while they were sleeping, but when I asked my mom, she wouldn't tell me. She went back a second day, and a third day, and then she said that's enough, she wasn't going there anymore. She said the blues were fine, everything is fine, there's nothing else I need to know. But she told

Alex things, I heard her on the phone. She told Alex it isn't one blue living in one room, it's a lot of blues, it's ten or twelve blues crammed into a little space. There were cameras in the ceiling and the blues didn't have beds, there wasn't room for beds, they had these nests, and some of the men didn't wear clothes. One blue man, while my mom was there, grabbed a blue woman's arm and did things then my mom had to leave. But it was good my mom went over there because it turned out the blues were sad. They missed things about their old home, just like Jacob and I miss things about our old home, and my mom was able to say to them, "I have these voices in my head and I think you know some of the voices."

So the blues started coming to see my mother, and she smiled at them when they came because they're our customers now, they're our *bread and butter*. The blues can't pay money, they don't have any, but they pay us other things, like a bag of potatoes, or a basket of apples. When we eat potatoes again, Jacob rolls his eyes. My mom says, "This is better than eating nothing, Jacob." Jacob says, "Not really, because nothing doesn't taste like shit," and he leaves all the potatoes on his plate. He's not always nice because he thinks missing our old home is a contest and he won.

II

I'm old enough to have a job to do. This is what my mom says, and my job is to play with the blue kids when they come to our house with their moms or dads. The first time they came I was scared because I didn't know what to do with them. I never saw a blue close up before, then all of a sudden they were there, two blue boys standing in our living room. They looked pretend, like they were just pretending to be boys. They wore T-shirts and ugly shorts they probably got for free and they smelled like stinky milk. They must have been scared too, because that mist started coming off of them, that's what the mist does when they're scared. It comes out of their eyes and their skin, and when the mist came toward me, I wanted to go hide somewhere, but my mom said no. She said you just wave it away, and she waved away the mist. The blue boys stared at me, and I stared at them, at their blue eyes, and pretty soon

they weren't scared anymore, because the mist stopped. Both of the boys were thin. Their arms stuck out funny, you could almost see their bones. I wanted to feed them some rice but my mom said that's *cultural interference*. She said the blues think their boys should be hungry and we need to show some respect. She told me instead of feeding them, I should think of a game I could teach them. I thought they'd act like dogs so I said they could catch balls in their mouths, but my mom said no. She didn't even smile. She shook me by the arms and said no. Then she took out the train puzzles, which the blue boys liked, or when it started raining, she told us to sit by the windows and watch the rain, and they liked this too.

Jacob is old enough to have a job to do too, but there are no more jobs. That's why he sits on the couch and when the blues come, he stares at them like he can make them go away. My mom says, "The customers are getting uncomfortable, Jacob. Can you guess why? Something needs to change here, buddy," but Jacob walks out the door instead of changing.

At first people thought the blues would do special things for us, but I don't think they can make balls float in the air like Ms Mueller said they could. I don't think they can do anything. My mom says that shouldn't matter because we're lucky to get to see them at all. My mom says, "Do you realize who they are? Do you realize how amazing it is that they're here?" I wonder a lot of things about the blues all the time, but I can only ask three questions a week, that's a rule my mom made up. I ask all my questions to Carrie, a blue girl who comes to our house with her mother. Whatever Carrie says I write down in my notebook. I asked Carrie how she got here, and where her dad is, and if she can read my mind. Also I asked her what color was the sky where she came from, and what their flowers looked like, and did their boats have to float on water or could they just float around in the air. My mom says I have the good questions. She says it's important to be asking questions and taking interest. A long time ago she wondered the same sorts of things, only there weren't blues to ask back then. Back then all she had were made-up stories, written by other people, about made-up creatures from made-up planets. The stories

were either scary or silly, but they were just stories. "Nobody used to really believe in stuff like this," she says. "And now you get to believe in it."

But some people say other things. Mr Lucas says if the blues are this big deal gift from God, why do they have germs all over them that can make us sick? He says this to Mrs Lucas and Ida when he's outside hosing down his driveway and the sidewalk, he does this every day now because you can't be too careful. He says there's these movies, taken through a microscope, of the germs, and also does anyone know what's in that mist they let off? The mist reminds Mr Lucas of nerve gas, and he wonders, has anyone done testing on it? Does anyone know how that mist affects our brains? His voice is very loud so I can hear him from my front steps. The water from Mr Lucas's hose runs into the street and Ida crouches down at the curb, I watch her drop black ants into the water. "Daniel! Come on over. You have to see this!" She shouts at me but I don't come. When she wanders away, I cross the street because I want to rescue the ants, but they don't crawl up onto the sticks I hold out for them. They don't want to be rescued.

That night my mom is turning out the light in my room and I tell her what Mr Lucas said about the blues. "I know with great certainty Mr Lucas is full of shit," my mom says. She says it's part of human nature, some good people will think bad things. Some good people will do bad things. She tucks in the sheet tight around me so I won't fall out of the bed. "Your number one job," she tells me, "is to protect the parts of you that are good. Do you understand, Daniel? You have to protect those good parts from other people."

I don't fall asleep right away. From my bed I can see the woods. Because the moon is out, I can see the vines in the branches too. If I look at them one way, they're vines, and if I look at them another way, they're not vines, I can't describe them right. Pretty soon I hear my mom talking to Alex on the phone. She tells him because of our situation, a lot of things have to be other people's problems. She has us to take care of, that's the top priority. She can't go taking care of the whole world. When I close my eyes, I'm trying to picture my goodness, but when I picture it, it's not something I can hold, it's like a lot of light falling out of me.

III

Every day it rains. It rains gray water on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday, and on Friday it's still raining. The rain falls down in large drops, the rain falls in little drops. There's thunder. There isn't thunder. My mom says enough complaining. The world needs rain. She draws me a picture with arrows pointing to the clouds and the rivers and the fish, but I still think the rain is boring. The boring rain makes a boring noise all day long then the rain gets into our roof. Jacob has to put a bucket in the hallway to catch the water. I can see a river in our street.

On Friday, in the rain, Carrie's mom Ms Rachel comes over for her two o'clock appointment and she brings Carrie like she always does. I count three bruises on Ms Rachel's face today, one on her cheek, one on her eye, and one next to her eye. My mom told me maybe things don't hurt the blues like they would hurt us. Maybe the bruises are a kind of love, my mom said. I can look at the bruises for fifteen seconds then I make myself look somewhere else because staring is bad.

My job is to play with Carrie so when Ms Rachel and my mom go into the back room, I show Carrie all my new blocks. Pretty soon we are building a castle together. We build two turrets, a protection wall, and four balconies, and I let Carrie hold whatever blocks she wants. She puts the mirror block on the top, it's the best block, even if the mirror is small and you can't see anything in it.

"Who's going to live here?" I ask Carrie.

"You will."

"I don't want to live in a castle."

"You have to."

"Where will you live?"

"Somewhere else," she says. We make up rules. These are the kinds of games we play now, games with lots of rules. Everybody has to enter the castle through the narrow doorway. Everybody has to sit where they're told and wear green shirts. "I don't like green," Carrie says. "It doesn't matter what you like," I say. If people don't listen, their fingers are chopped off. We play the game for a long time, lots of people lose fingers, then the rain stops. In the backyard, we float paper cups in the puddles. The cups are ships, they're traveling to some place far away, and each ship carries a lot of important

things. Then we dig paths in the mud with sticks, we go right up to where the woods start. I pull off my socks and shoes, and Carrie isn't wearing her shoes either. Her feet look strange, like two blue fishes stuck onto her legs. "Stop staring," she says. "Stop it. Your feet look funny too."

"My feet are normal," I tell her.

"They're not," she says. Nobody thinks she's pretty. I make the paper cups drown by stomping on them, though Carrie rescues the last cup, she puts it in her pocket. Before we go inside, I ask her my questions.

The first question is why she came here. She said everybody was supposed to live here in castles. "People don't live in castles anymore," I tell her. And she said the animals in the woods were supposed to talk to her. The squirrels would sit on her bed and talk to her and if she ever got lonely, they would play games with her, or make up songs, and they'd eat nuts right from her hand.

"Squirrels don't talk," I say.

"Somebody made that all up," she says. Though I'm not supposed to tell anyone about where we came from, I tell Carrie about my old home. I think it'll make her feel better. I tell her about the chickens and the goats, and the creek with the rocks in it, and the hills, and how people used to sing all the time and everybody knew the songs.

"I don't believe you," Carrie says. "Show me."

"I can't. It's far away."

"How far?"

"I don't know."

"When I take my bath at night, my mom cries. She cries every night," Carrie says. She tries to hold my hand but we're not supposed to touch them anymore because of the diseases. When I yank my hand away, the mist starts coming off her and I watch it come. It comes out of her skin. It curls around the grass between us. Then it curls around me but I don't run from it. It's soft and warm. It curls around my legs and ankles and my arms, and when it does, it feels like I'm touching inside someone.

IV

At first when the blues came, people told nice stories about them. People told stories like this: once there was the blue woman who taught Mrs Gorski

all the funny dances. Or once there was the blue boy who picked a thousand yellow dandelions from the fields, then he left the flowers at everyone's front doors. But now the stories people tell about the blues have the sad endings. I don't like stories anymore but Ida tells Jacob and me anyhow, and at the end of each story, Ida always says, "It's the truth, cross my heart, hope to die." She thinks I'll believe anything she tells me. "He will," Jacob says. "He really will." At our old home, we had to believe in a lot of different things. Whatever people told us we believed. My mom says I don't have to be like that anymore. I used to like believing.

We're sitting outside on Ida's sidewalk, Jacob, me, and Ida. In front of us a bird picks apart a dead thing in the gutter, the bird shouldn't do that, and Ida is tell us her new stories. She tells us about the blue girl they found behind our school, she was tied to a tree, somebody had done experiments on her. And she tells us how Tom Durand got a blue boy to eat poop on a stick, he has the whole thing on video, and also how Jeff Campbell was down in the bushes with another blue girl, in fact, the blue girl was Carrie – "you know, your girlfriend, Daniel" – and Carrie was howling out these bad sounds, she didn't have her shorts on. Instead of her shorts she had all that mist coming out of her, but a lot of good it did, it didn't do anything good. Jeff said all the mist did was make her face hard to see, which was just fine with him. I try not to listen to the rest of the story. I look at the dirty black bird hopping around the gutter, the bird picks its head up and looks at me with its black eyes, like we are sharing a secret. There are things caught in its beak, fur or skin or something. But then Ida leans her face close to mine so I have to smell her breath and she keeps talking.

"Do you want to know what she sounded like, Daniel? She sounded like this." Ida opens her mouth very wide and makes ugly screeching noises. "She sounded like a cat when you cut off their tail!"

I tell Ida to shut up. I tell her when we go back to our old home some day, she can't come with us, and then she'll be all alone. Nobody will be here to listen to her dumb stories.

"You're stupid," Jacob tells me. He turns to Ida. "We're not going back."

"Daniel, honestly, I don't care where little boys like you go. Anyway, that's not even my best story. My best story is I saw something in the woods today. I saw something really important," Ida says.

"What? What'd you see?" Jacob asks.

"I can show you."

"I don't want to go in the woods," I tell them.

"It's at the end of the old clearing. I found a lot of garbage there. Somebody was having a picnic, or a lot of people. There were all these bottles and apple cores and paper bags. There was this bad smell and then all these crows. So I looked up in the trees and guess what I saw?"

"A kite?" I say.

"Something *dead*. Something *dead* and blue wearing one of those flowered dresses that they wear. I think all the blues are going to go away," Ida says. "My dad told me. He says a lot of people don't even get what's happening but we'll wake up one morning and the blues will be gone, and then everything goes back to how it should be. Poof!"

"Where will they go?" I ask Ida, but Ida pretends she can't hear me. Jacob pulls her up from the sidewalk and they walk over to the woods together. They're holding hands, they think I can't see them holding hands but I see them. I run after them and tug hard on my brother's arm.

"Go away," Jacob says.

"Who's watching me?" I ask. "Mom said you have to watch me."

"Shoo, you're like a bug." The woods swallow them up. In the woods there are animals in the leaves. You can hear the bellies of the animals dragging on the ground. I go back into our yard where I sit on the wheelbarrow that's been broken for a long time, it doesn't have any of its wheels. The sky is high and blue and all the clouds have gone away, I don't know where they've gone.

The last time I went into the woods, I saw a hole in the ground, and how do you know what lives down there in the hole? It could be a snake or a groundhog or nothing, how are you supposed to know which one? We're going back to our old home some day because our new home isn't really our home. Nobody lives here with us so there are all the empty bedrooms, and also no chickens and no goats, nobody is singing all the time the songs I know. "It's complicated," my mother used to tell me, and when she told me this, she

sounded sad. There are too many choices to make in our new home. Every day there are too many ways to go. You can take a step into the woods and turn around and come back. You can go into the woods and go very far, and then turn around and come back. You can go into the woods and not come back. You can not go into the woods.

V

Not long ago my mom pulled me onto her lap. We sat in the kitchen. She smelled like lemons and tea and the sun came in the window and made the floor full of light. My mom waved her hand around in the light, and the shadows she made she called dogs, but they didn't look like dogs, they looked like shadows. We were busy ignoring the woods. They were there, the trees, the trees and more trees, but we pretended they were not there, because we couldn't see them from the kitchen. The radio also was not on, we did not listen to the kitchen radio anymore, because of the things it said. "Daniel," my mom sighed. She told me she wished we lived in a nicer place but we don't always get what we wished for. So she was doing the best she could. She did the best she could with what she had here. She was putting shoes on our feet and food in our mouths and, also, she was making sure our beds, and our arms and our toes, and our whole house are surrounded by people who love us. These were the people you can't see. These people might be dead, or we might not know who they are, but they were holding hands around us, and whatever happened to us or to other people or other beings or whoever, they were singing us good and beautiful songs. "Forget about the dark, okay? We don't always need to be troubling our heads about dark things," my mom said. She was holding me like I was little.

The light on the kitchen floor was shining. I asked my mom to sing me one of the good and beautiful songs, because I can't hear them, and my mom said none of the songs have words but they went something like this.

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KEN LIU

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THE ALIEN CITY WAS A PERFECT CIRCLE about ten kilometers in diameter. From the air, the buildings – cubes around the edge of the city, cones, pyramids, tetrahedra in the middle – were forbidding spikes. Ring-shaped streets divided the city into concentric sections.

James Bell banked the two-person shuttle, the *Arthur Evans*, into a U-turn to pass over the ruins a second time. The thin but powerful man was in his forties, just beginning to lose his hair and showing some white in his beard. He pushed the joystick forward to bring the vehicle lower, staring intently out of the cockpit with his blue eyes.

Next to him was thirteen-year-old Maggie, thin and awkward like a newborn colt. She gasped and grabbed onto the handholds above her seat as the ship suddenly dipped.

"Sorry," James said. Maggie's mother, Lauren, had hated the way he flew too, with all the sudden drops and sharp swerves. A memory of Lauren grabbing onto his arms as he dragged her onto a rollercoaster came to him, and he smiled for a moment before a mixture of regret and resentment replaced the memory.

He shook away the feeling and leveled the ship. "Julia," he said to the ship's AI, "take over. Keep it smooth and slow." The AI beeped in acknowledgement.

"I tend to fly a little recklessly on a planet with a working atmosphere and magnetic field." He rambled on, mostly to fill the silence. "Since they keep out the harmful solar and cosmic radiation, I leave the heavy shell with all the radiation shields and monitors up in orbit and just bring the core of the shuttle down. The ship maneuvers so much better this way."

Maggie brushed strands of long red hair out of her face and resolutely refused to look at him, keeping her gaze on the alien buildings passing beneath the ship.

She had been like this ever since she came aboard two days ago, giving him only one- or two-word answers or saying nothing at all. He had no shared history with her, no background against which to interpret her gestures, no context in which to fill her silences with meaning. He

THE MESSAGE



felt awkward in her presence, unsure how to converse. His daughter was more mysterious to him than the many dead civilizations he had studied.

Six months ago, just as he was rushing to complete the survey of Pi Baeo ahead of the terraformers' planned obliteration of the surface of the planet with their asteroids and comets, he received a message from Lauren, the first time he had heard from her in ten years. She was sick, she said, and she was going to die. Maggie needed him.

Maggie was born after he and Lauren had split up. Indeed, he hadn't even known about her until Lauren sent him a picture a year after the birth. He had stared at that picture of the bundle of pink flesh without knowing how to react. He wasn't ready to be a father, and Lauren must have known that, which was why she had said nothing to him as they parted. She had accepted his offer to pay child support without demanding anything more, and he had been relieved.

The surprise message from Lauren had caused him to reluctantly drop everything on Pi Baeo to go to her world. The trip took three months in real time, but only two days in the shuttle with relativistic dilation. By the time he finally got there, Lauren was dead, and Maggie had been on her own for two months, mourning her mother and imagining an uncertain future with a father she had never met.

With little fanfare and no instructions, he was granted custody of the sullen and grieving teenager. *How was he supposed to learn to be a father in the two days it took to come back to Pi Baeo?*

James sighed. He didn't like complications in his life. Now that they were back on Pi Baeo, he had less than a week to complete the survey before the arrival of the comets and asteroids.

"There's some writing," Maggie said quietly. Inscriptions and images covered the alien buildings, which appeared to be carved out of massive, solid stone. There were no windows or doors.

James was surprised but glad that Maggie seemed to take an interest in the ruins. He was comfortable lecturing to curious students.

"That's one of the reasons I'm interested in this place. Most cultures that get past the Kuny-MacLean boundary plunge into a digital dark age and stop producing analog writing. All their

information becomes locked in fragile digital artifacts that don't survive well and are difficult to decipher. They went digital here too, but these samples –"

The ship accelerated, lurched and dropped precipitously. Maggie screamed.

"James," Julia's voice was urgent, "there seem to be errors in the stabilization routines beyond my ability to correct. You have to take over with analog controls."

James grabbed the joystick and pulled back sharply. The engines groaned. But it was too late. The ship was falling too fast.

"Prepare for impact," Julia's voice said.

James instinctively reached out to hold Maggie against her seat, as if the strength of his arm was enough to save her from the ground rushing up at them.

.....
The robots, mechanical spiders as big as house- cats, skittered all over the exterior of the *Arthur Evans* and examined the surface for damage. Sparks flew as they welded and applied sealant.

"Well, that should do it," James said as he finished bandaging the cut on Maggie's forehead. "Julia saved us by deforming the ship's hull as we crashed to absorb most of the energy. It'll take the robots a few days to repair the ship, but that still gives us plenty of time to leave before the first comets get here."

Maggie sat up and felt the bandage with her hand. She flexed her legs and looked over her arms. "What am I supposed to do while you work? Just sit here?"

At least she's talking now, James thought.

"You can come with me. But I have to work, so I can't watch you every minute."

Maggie's lips narrowed. "I can take care of myself. I'm not five."

"I didn't mean –"

"I wish I was in our old house on my own, instead of almost getting killed here with *you*." Tears welled in her blue eyes. "That stupid judge! He had no clue –"

"That's enough!" *Maybe it was easier when she didn't talk.* The only sound in the shuttle was the intermittent beeping from the diagnostic console as Julia continued to run tests. Maggie glared at her father defiantly.

He tried to lower his voice. "The court was going to send you to a foster home unless I assumed custody, all right? I'm doing this because your mother wrote –"

The anger and sorrow that she had bottled up for so long could no longer be contained. Now that she was talking, she was going to let him have it. "Oh it's so *noble* of you to take up the burden of your *child*. I hate you –"

"Shut up and listen!" he growled. She seemed to him an unreasonable ball of pure fury and hatred. "Now, I know I haven't been in your life for all these years. Your mother and I –" He wondered if she would understand. He wondered if he himself understood how things turned out. "It's complicated."

"Yes, 'complicated.' You prefer communing with dead aliens to taking care of a flesh-and-blood family. That *is* difficult to explain."

The words punched him hard, and in them he heard an echo of his dead ex-wife.

He waited until his breathing was even again.

"You don't have to like me. But I *am* responsible for you until you're no longer a minor. I'll leave you alone as much as possible, and you don't even have to talk to me. But you can make this easier for both of us by at least trying to be civil."

The diagnostic console beeped loudly. Julia spoke: "I've discovered the cause of the crash. The navigation system suffered an unusual number of single-bit hardware memory errors during the flyover. In fact, similar hardware errors are showing in all the systems."

"Bad memory chips?"

"That's a possibility. I suspect it's related to your attempt to economize by using cheaper components during the last retrofitting."

Maggie shook her head exaggeratedly. "Right, and you'll take care of me just as well as you do your ship."

The atmosphere of Pi Baeo contained little oxygen and was devoid of moisture. While there was no need for full environmental suits, James and Maggie had to wear oxygen masks and overalls to keep in the moisture.

They gazed at the gargantuan ruins. Even the cubes forming the outer ring, much smaller than the megaliths inside, rose almost fifty meters into

the air. The two humans were ants crawling about a giant's playground.

Keeping his pledge to leave Maggie alone, James hiked towards the city without glancing at her. After a moment, she followed, staying a few meters back.

Secretly, James was relieved that he no longer had to strive to imitate some idealized vision of a good father. He couldn't do it, always knew he couldn't do it. Lauren had been right about him, and he didn't want to playact any more.

The ring of cubes formed a solid wall. James aimed for a break where one of the cubes had crumbled. Up close, they could see that it was made from smaller blocks, held together by gravity and friction through an intricate mortise-and-tenon system.

They climbed over the rubble. Maggie was athletic and nimble, scrambling over the broken stones like a mountain goat. James refrained from offering to help her.

Beyond the break, the monumental pyramids loomed over the flat ground like towering mountains casting long and oppressive shadows. The city felt claustrophobic, despite the immense empty space between the pyramids.

James took pictures of the large-scale writing on the smooth faces of the pyramids. There were several distinct scripts, indicative of multiple languages. However, the inscriptions on every visible surface seemed identical. It was as if the same few sentences were repeated over and over.

"This isn't giving me much linguistic data to work with," James muttered to himself.

Shouting at her father and the strenuous hike that followed had drained some of Maggie's anger. Her curiosity and a desire to show off got the better of her.

"They must have thought that whatever they wanted to say was really important to repeat it so many times," she said. "Crude but effective data redundancy."

She sounded like she was reciting from a book. James was amused, but he liked this version of Maggie better. He was more comfortable talking about work. "You like information theory and that sort of thing?"

"Yeah. I'm good with computers and...when I was little, I used to beg Mom to buy me books

on xenoarchaeology and data preservation. And I went to archaeology camp. I knew all that stuff you said about the digital dark age.”

James pictured the young Maggie reading xenoarchaeology books. *That must have driven Lauren crazy.* He smiled. Then he wondered why a child who had never met her father nevertheless wanted to study the same thing she thought he studied. His nose tingled and felt itchy.

He tried to keep the conversation going. “What do you think of the pictures?” He nodded at the many diagrams among the inscriptions, most still legible despite years of erosion.

“Maps of the city?”

The pictures depicted concentric circles with small squares, triangles, pentagons, and circles in the spaces between the circles. Then Maggie frowned. “But that doesn’t make sense. They all look different.”

James took a few zoomed-in pictures of the drawings and compared them with the layout of the buildings generated from aerial photographs. Maggie was right. The drawings didn’t match the real layout and didn’t match each other.

“And how could people – aliens – live in a city with only circular streets? I didn’t see any roads coming out the center.”

James looked at her, impressed. “That’s very perceptive.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. The way she tilted her head was almost a carbon copy of Lauren’s gesture. He felt a wave of tenderness.

“Actually, I don’t think the people of Pi Baeo ever lived here. Aerial surveys showed no signs of burial sites or trash heaps nearby. I also scanned the buildings with ground penetrating radar. They’re completely solid, no space inside at all. It’s probably not accurate to call this place a ‘city.’”

“So what is it?”

“I have no idea. Hopefully, I can figure it out before it’s gone forever in a week.”

“How old is it?”

“Best I can tell, Pi Baeo lost almost all its water about twenty thousand years ago. Though I don’t know exactly what happened, the process seemed to take only a few centuries. As the water ran out, the inhabitants fought over the diminishing supply. Every settlement I’ve found was destroyed by warfare. The destruction was so complete that the

robots recovered very few intact artifacts.”

“But this place looks untouched.”

“That’s right. Thousands of kilometers from the nearest population centers, this place was left alone as Pi Baeo died. I want to know why.”

“But they were aliens. Why do you care about *them* so much? They didn’t even know about us.” Resentment had crept back into her voice. She remembered again how he had never even tried to reach out to her, to know her even a little.

“That’s true,” he said. The change in her tone made him nervous; he did not want the furious, unreasoning child to return. Her question also saddened him. He had never been good at articulating why his work meant so much to him, but he wanted to try.

Maybe his daughter would understand him where his wife couldn’t.

“The human race has explored the stars for a long time. Yet we’re still alone. All the alien civilizations we’ve found are dead.

“Most civilizations are very self-centered and focus only on the present. They don’t think much about preserving a legacy for those who might come long after they’re gone. Their art and poetry, their rise and fall, their brief time in this universe: most of that is beyond recovery. And in a week, the icy comets and asteroids sent by the terraformers will bombard this planet and bring water back to it. Even the last traces of their existence will be gone.

“But I always feel that there is a message that the people I study want to pass on. Whatever I discover will be the last testament and whisper of the people of Pi Baeo. In studying them, I become connected to them, and in passing on their message, the human race is no longer so alone.”

Maggie looked thoughtful and chewed her lips.

James let out a held breath; he felt inexplicably happy as he watched his daughter nod, almost imperceptibly.

The sun was sinking below the wall of cubes. “It’s getting late,” James said. “Let’s come back tomorrow.”

While James prepared dinner in the galley, Julia tutored Maggie. As a holographic projection of the periodic table of elements floated in the air, the AI droned on about the properties of

the lanthanides. Having spent so many years with James Bell, the AI had acquired a taste for holding forth professorially. Gradually, Maggie's eyelids drooped and her head dipped forward.

Julia stopped. "You're not even trying! You've been out of school for two months already. How do you expect to catch up without putting in the effort?"

"Don't yell at me! It's not like I wanted to be out of school."

Julia modulated her voice to be gentler. "I'm sorry. It must have been difficult, losing your mother like that."

"What would *you* know about it?" Maggie said angrily.

"I may be a machine, but I've been with Dr Bell many years... I also knew your mother."

Maggie's head snapped up. "Tell me about my parents... what happened between them?"

"I can't. That's personal."

Maggie glanced at her father's figure moving in the galley. She would have to wait.

"Can't you move to a topic that's more interesting than chemistry?"

"What do you consider interesting?"

"How about some archaeology? Can we try to translate some of the text we found on the pyramids today?"

This was not on the recommended standard curriculum, but Julia decided to indulge her. "All right. As you know, there's no possibility of a Rosetta Stone here. So guesses at meanings must rely on non-linguistic -"

"Yes, yes. I know all that. Just show me pictures of other writing you've found that match anything we saw on the pyramids."

Julia beeped in annoyance at being interrupted. But she made the periodic table disappear and projected in its place photographs of inscriptions found in other ruins on Pi Baeo. "These symbols appear to match a substring in the inscriptions on the pyramids."

Maggie examined the photographs. "Zoom out a bit. I want to see where you found them."

Julia complied. Maggie furrowed her brows in puzzlement. The photographs were much harder to interpret than the neat drawings in archaeology books. She couldn't tell what she was looking at. Everything seemed to be piles of rubble.

Julia remained silent, still miffed at Maggie.

"It's easier if you look at a three-d reconstruction," James said as he stepped out of the galley. "Julia, put up the models and show Maggie where these symbols were found."

The holographic projection now changed to reconstructions of tall, graceful alien buildings honeycombed with windows and doors. Julia highlighted the areas where the matched symbols were found.

"See any pattern?" James asked.

"They're always found near doorways," Maggie said.

"Possible translation?"

"Enter?"

"Or exit."

"So, after all that work, we still can't figure out the most significant bit of the message?" Maggie laughed. "We still don't know if the inscriptions are saying 'Come in. Welcome!' or 'Get out, and stay out!'"

It was the first time that James had heard her laugh, and he marveled at how he could hear echoes of Lauren as well as himself in it. A wave of affection, tinged with regret, washed over him.

Maggie tiptoed her way past her father's cabin and into the cockpit of the shuttle. Through the window she could see hundreds of bright streaks in the eastern sky. Promising destruction along with rebirth, the comets bathed the alien landscape in a silvery glow.

She fumbled around for her father's headset, put it on, and whispered into the quiet dark, "Julia."

The AI answered in her earpiece. "Yes?"

"Tell me about my parents."

Julia said nothing.

"Okay, we'll do this the hard way." Maggie slid forward and pulled out the keyboard from beneath the console. She punched some keys and watched as the head-up display on the cockpit window flashed into life. A blinking cursor appeared in the upper-left hand corner.

She typed at the prompt: >(DEFINE ACKER-MANN-HEAP-FILL (LAMBDA () (

"All right!" Julia broke the silence. Maggie smiled at the hint of a hiss in the AI's voice. "No need to drop down into code like that. I'll grant you access, but I will inform Dr. Bell -"

"You'll do no such thing." Maggie leaned forward and began to type again.

"Okay! Okay!"

"Don't be so glum. This isn't a real security breach. He won't be really mad if he finds out. And you can always blame it on the cheap memory chips that are generating all those hardware errors."

Julia muttered incomprehensibly.

Digging through her father's electronic archives, Maggie thought, was a lot like archaeology. For years she had studied the subject to feel closer to him, to maintain a sense of connection. For so long she had yearned to uncover the man her mother never talked about, to dig out the man who had abandoned her before she was born.

Pictures, electronic messages, recordings, and videos were the artifacts of a lost past, created by two people who did not have in mind a future viewer and who wrote and laughed and glanced at the camera only for themselves. Yet, somehow she felt that she was their intended audience. They had a message for her, a message maybe even they did not know they wanted to send.

Maggie put the pieces in context, built a chronology. She excavated and reconstructed the mystery that was her father.

The video showed the inside of a tiny studio apartment. Maggie gazed at the younger, smooth-shaven version of her father speaking into the camera. He was nervously playing with a small box in his hand.

"Julia, can you run the numbers again?"

The AI sounded exasperated. "The numbers aren't going to change. I can search for a comparable ring that's cheaper –"

"No! I don't *want* a cheaper ring. She deserves this one."

"Then I see no choice but for you to give up on that shuttle. You can't afford both."

Now Maggie was looking at the younger version of her mother, alone in the same studio apartment from the previous video. Young Lauren was full of the glow of hope and youth. Maggie allowed herself to cry. She missed her mother so damn much.

"Thanks for letting me know, Julia," Lauren said.

"Sometimes we have to save James from himself."

("You have a history of spilling his secrets to the women in his life," Maggie whispered into the headset. Julia beeped once in protest and then went silent.)

Lauren admired the ring on her hand. "It is beautiful." She twisted it around her finger. "But heavy."

"I tried to stop him from dragging you onto that rollercoaster," Julia said. "I know how much you hate those things. But he thought he had the best chance of you saying yes if he proposed just when you were scared and clinging to him."

"His chances were always one hundred percent."

"It will make a good story for the children someday."

Lauren took off the ring. "I'll tell him that my skin is allergic to the ring, and he has to return it. I'd rather he buy that shuttle, and we'll wander the stars together, weighed down by nothing."

The video now showed the cockpit of a two-person shuttle, which Maggie recognized as the *Arthur Evans*, but a lot cleaner and newer looking. James and Lauren sat in the two chairs.

James sighed. "I thought you wanted this."

"I did."

"Then what changed?"

Lauren bit her lip. "We've been flying around the galaxy for five years. What exactly do we have to show for it? Twenty storage containers of broken artifacts. A few monographs that no one reads. Dead aliens don't have descendants lobbying for cultural preservation, and all the civilizations we've studied collapsed before they made it off their home planets so there's no technological payoff. Face it, people just don't care about dead aliens."

"I care. It matters to *me* that they be remembered and understood. A man wants to leave behind his name, and a civilization wants to leave behind its stories. I'm the only thing standing between them and oblivion."

"James, we aren't so young any more. We can't wander the stars forever. We have to think about the future, about us."

James's face hardened and his lips fused into a thin line. "I'm not going to sit in an office at a desk just so we can buy a picket-fenced house on some

freshly developed planet and pop out children. The terraformers move fast, and I have to save whatever I can before they erase these mysteries forever."

"We can always come back to this life, be on the move again, when the children are older."

"If we put down roots anywhere, we'll never leave again. Weight leads to more weight."

"You won't even give it a chance? Try it for a few years?"

"I don't understand what's changed."

"You empathize so deeply with vanished aliens, but you can't feel what I want?"

"This discussion is over." He got up and left the cockpit.

Lauren sat still, alone. After a while, she sighed and caressed her belly.

"Why didn't you tell him?" It was Julia.

Lauren shook her head. "If I tell him, he'll give in because he'll try to do the responsible thing, but he'll always resent me and the baby. I'd rather not have him at all than have him believe we weighed him down."

"I would have tried, you know."

In the video, her father hadn't shaved for a few days. The cockpit was messy, unkempt, with food wrappers everywhere and dirty clothes draped on chairs. He had been drinking.

"She didn't want to force you to pick between what you wanted to do and what you felt you had to do," Julia said.

"She thought I wasn't ready," he shot back. "She didn't trust me. Maybe she was right."

After breakfast, James prepared the hover bike.

He looked at Maggie, concerned. "You have dark circles around your eyes. You didn't sleep well, did you? Maybe you should just stay in the ship today and rest."

But Maggie would not be dissuaded. She sat on the bike behind her father and put her arms around his waist. Then, she leaned forward and put her face against his back.

James couldn't move for a moment, overwhelmed by this gesture of trust. His mind flashed to the picture of baby Maggie, and suddenly he felt an overwhelming sense of tenderness towards that helpless bundle of pink, the tightly clutched

fists and squeeze-shut eyes.

They covered ground quickly on the hover bike, zooming towards the heart of the ruins.

"You've got to be kidding me," James said, as he brought the bike to a sudden halt.

In front of them was the first of the many concentric, circular streets that they had seen from the air. Only now did it become clear that the circle was not a street at all. It was a ditch with smooth walls that dropped straight down, over fifty meters deep and twice as wide.

"Moats *inside* the city?" Maggie was amused.

"I'm beginning to think that the message here is pretty simple: we don't want you to go to the center."

"Then we really have to go." Maggie's expression was mischievous, childish. "The secret must be a good one."

James chuckled, but he shared Maggie's excitement. He folded the hover bike into its compact storage form – like an old-fashioned suitcase. He tossed it down to the bottom of the ditch, where it clattered loudly before coming to rest. Then he took out the rappelling hooks and cables and showed Maggie how to use them. She was a quick learner, and the two quickly descended to the bottom of the ditch, walked across, and climbed up the other side.

A few minutes later, they stopped again at the foot of one of the giant pentagonal pyramids.

"Look at that," James said. "New pictures."

Besides the familiar, repetitive inscriptions, there was a series of new picture panels along the bottom of the pyramid, like a comic strip.

"Which end do we start with?" Maggie asked.

James shrugged. "No idea. You saw how all I've been able to do so far is pattern matching sign groups, like ideographs. I don't know if the reading convention here is left-to-right, right-to-left, or something non-linear."

Maggie decided to try left to right first.

There were five panels. The first one contained the familiar 'map' of the city. The next panel added two egg-shaped figures, each with eight radiating legs. One egg, in the center of the city, had curled legs and a body crosshatched with thin lines. The other egg was far outside the city.

"These spider-like things are stylized drawings of the inhabitants of Pi Bao," James said.

"Why is one of them all cracked?"

"Not sure. But it could be a way to indicate that the figure is dead, sick, or not real. Something's wrong with it."

In the third panel, both figures were drawn with smooth exteriors and straight legs. The one initially at the center had moved some distance towards the edge of the city while the other one had moved closer to the city.

"Could be a resurrection or rebirth myth," James said.

In the fourth panel, both eggs moved even closer to each other, and in the last panel the two eggs were united at the edge of the city. Their legs entwined.

Excited, Maggie picked up the theme. "So this place is like a magical cave, where you get to meet your loved ones as they return from death." She laughed.

James laughed with her. He hadn't realized how much he missed having someone he loved with him as he explored these desolate ruins.

He walked back from the last panel, his brows furrowed. "But if you go from right to left, the story is very different: two friends arrive at the city, and one decides to go in while the other decides to leave. The adventurous one dies at the center."

"Then the title for your version would be: 'The Curse of the Pharaoh of Pi Baeo'. Treasure hunters and future archaeologists beware! A horrible fate awaits if you don't leave right now!" Maggie clapped her father on the back. "This is too funny. We've got to prove the curse wrong!"

She's just like me, James thought. *Fearless, curious. And so like her. That laugh.*

For a second he seemed to see Lauren standing where Maggie was standing, looking as young as the day they said goodbye to each other.

"Lucky you. You missed the diapers and ear infections and sleep tantrums and the terrible twos and threes and fives," Lauren said. But she was smiling at him. "But you'll have to deal with the teenage years."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wish—" He couldn't finish.

"She's really something, isn't she?" She lifted her hand to brush away her hair. Her finger still wore the plain plastic ring that she used to replace the ring he had given her. His heart seemed to skip a

beat, and his eyes became blurry and he could not see her any more.

"Dad! Dad! What's wrong?"

He discreetly wiped his eyes. It was the first time she had called him *Dad*. He looked at Maggie, and the feeling of being responsible for her was not heavy at all. It felt like a pair of wings. "Nothing. The wind."

"Let's go to the center."

He put his arm around her shoulder. "I saw signs of very powerful weapons being used at the other sites on Pi Baeo. The people who built this place were technologically advanced, and I don't think these warnings were just superstition. I think they were trying to warn intruders away from some real danger."

"What danger could last twenty thousand years?"

"I don't know. But I believe this is a situation that calls for caution."

Maggie looked at her father, wide-eyed. "I thought you wanted to understand their message."

James felt the pull of the mystery at the center. Hints of danger had always only made it more interesting for him. And he yearned to give in to it, to do as Maggie suggested.

He remembered the feeling of Maggie leaning her head against his back on the bike. *There are more important things than dead aliens and their messages.*

"Things are...different now," he said. Slowly, a bit reluctantly, he turned the bike around. "It's too risky."

"I don't understand. What's changed?"

He looked at her, and instead of answering, he pulled her into a hug. She stiffened for a second and then yielded to his embrace.

Maggie tossed and turned, unable to sleep.

She had suggested that some of the robots be sent to investigate the center of the city. It would have been safer than going themselves. But James had said no. The robots were needed to complete the repair on the *Arthur Evans* before the comets arrived.

The more Maggie thought about it, the more she was convinced that there was no real danger. Her father claimed that the civilization here had reached a high level of technology, but this place

was built with stones and had cartoons carved into them! That sounded like a temple of superstition, not an advanced military installation with booby traps that still functioned after twenty thousand years.

Things are...different now, he had said. She remembered the wistful look on his face as he gave up their exploration.

Her father believed that dead aliens had stories worth telling. But he also loved her mother, and he would have, was beginning to, would, love her.

I'd rather not have him at all than have him believe we weighed him down.

She got dressed.

"Julia," James called from his bunk.

"You can't sleep?"

"I can't seem to let the puzzle go."

"I thought so."

Julia turned on the light. James sat up.

"Scan through those 'maps' of the city. There must be a pattern in them."

Julia spoke up after a few minutes. "I think I have something. The seven ditches divide the city into seven concentric bands, with a small circle in the middle. While the locations of the pyramids change in each picture, the numbers and shapes of the pyramids within the bands are constant."

Julia projected a table onto the wall of James's cabin:

Band	Tetra- hedrons	Square Pyramids	Pentagon Pyramids	Cones	Total
1	2	0	0	0	2
2	2	6	0	0	8
3	2	6	10	0	18
4	2	6	10	14	32
5	2	6	10	3	21
6	2	6	1	0	9
7	2	0	0	0	2

"Good. But what's their meaning?" James asked.

"I can do a brute-force search in the databases for these numbers to see if anything turns up."

"Do it. I'll keep on playing with them too to see if I can spot anything."

The comets were much closer now. In their pale light, the ground seemed to be covered by frost. Maggie made good progress on the hover bike. She had cajoled Julia into releasing the equipment to her and swore the AI to secrecy.

"It's just like with my mom. I don't want him to resent me," she had said to Julia. "I'll prove that he won't have to change because of me."

It was difficult to climb up from the bottom of the first ditch with the hover bike strapped to her back.

"I won't weigh you down," she muttered, and pulled herself up another notch.

Each successive ditch was deeper and wider than the one before. She was covered in sweat after a while, and the night air no longer seemed so cold.

Finally, after crossing the last ditch, she saw in the center an immense rock column rising hundreds of meters into the sky like an accusatory finger.

James felt a bit nauseous and dizzy. Too many things were happening: the crash, memories of Lauren, dealing with Maggie. He hadn't been eating or sleeping well.

He tried to clear his mind. *Ninety-two pyramids arranged in concentric circles like crystalline shells.*

An image from the evening before – Maggie falling asleep from boredom as Julia droned on about the periodic table – came unbidden to his mind. He smiled and imagined his daughter sleeping soundly in the cabin next to his. He wanted to get up and just go stare at her sleeping form...

"Julia, I got it!"

Julia chirped expectantly.

"The plan of this city is a model of the atom, but not a model that we are familiar with. The concentric circles are electron shells, and the structures represent electrons in different orbitals. Here, bring up one the pictures so I can show you."

Julia projected one of the diagrams onto the wall of the cabin. James pointed to it as he went on. "The tetrahedrons are electrons in s orbitals, and the squares p's, the pentagons d's, the cones f's. This place is a uranium atom, atomic weight 92, with 92 electrons."

"That would explain all the hardware errors."

The chill running down his spine cut through James's euphoria. "I thought those were from the cheap memory chips."

"That was my original theory, but a source of alpha particles nearby would explain the frequency of the errors much better. Since all the radiation shielding and monitors are still in orbit, I can't be sure. But given that uranium is the most common naturally occurring fissile material, a stylized representation of it is a good symbol to indicate the presence of radiation."

James was stunned. "You think this place is a giant radiation warning sign? How long until we can take off?"

"I can rush the repairs and get them done in a few hours. But, I have to tell you something about Maggie."

Jagged rocks and what appeared to be glass shards covered the ground between the last ditch and the rock column. Maggie was glad that she was on a hover bike. On foot, this final stretch would be a nightmare. The builders really didn't want anyone to get through.

She made it to the foot of the spike. This was it. She would uncover the mystery at the center of the ruins and prove to her father that she was not going to be a burden.

They could have been a family among the stars.

There was a cave at the foot of the spike. Maggie strapped the bright flashlight to her helmet and went in. The cave spiraled downwards. She felt flushed, and stopped for a moment to wipe the sweat from her forehead. *This no-sleep thing is finally catching up to me*, she thought.

At the bottom of the cave was a metallic barrier. Maggie cut a hole through it with the torch cutter on her excavation multi-tool.

She crawled through.

Inside, the cavern was full of glass spheres packed in layers. She picked one up. It was about half a meter in diameter. Tiny metallic beads were suspended inside, packed into a tight lattice. Illuminated by her flashlight, the beads threw off brilliant rainbows of color.

The sphere felt very heavy, and hot.

As he rushed into the alien ruins on his bike, James swore at Julia and himself.

"I thought it was best to let her go," Julia had tried to defend herself. "I wanted to give her a chance to prove herself, the way you and Lauren never gave yourselves a chance."

The people of Pi Baeo had nuclear power. Knowing that it would take eons for the spent fuel to decay to safe levels, they had buried the waste here, as far away from civilization as possible.

Maybe they knew that their planet was drying up or maybe they were just cautious, but they tried to build this place so that it would warn their descendants or future visitors from the stars. Even as they were dying, they thought to look outside themselves and speak to the future.

They tried to encode the message at different levels, in multiple ways. They built with stone, the only material that would last millions of years. They hoped that the message would be understood universally: *There is nothing of value here. Danger! Stay away.* He had understood it only too late.

Recklessly, he hurried down the ditches and scrambled up the other side. His breathing became jagged and he turned up the oxygen feed to his mask. All the while he thought about the invisible particles speeding at him, streaming through him, tearing apart cells and tissues.

He was beyond the last ditch.

"Maggie!" he shouted.

At the foot of the monstrous spike of rock at the center, a tiny figure waved at him.

He twisted the handle on his hover bike and was by her in a minute.

Maggie was standing next to twenty, thirty glass spheres. Her face was flushed and full of sweat.

"Aren't these beautiful?" she said. "Dad, there're many more down there. I did it. I found their secret. We can do this together." Then she collapsed, pulled off her mask, and vomited.

He picked her up and carried her to the bike, and rode as fast as he could away from the spheres until he had to stop by the ditch.

In Maggie's weakened state, there was no way for her to rappel down the ditch or to climb up the other side by herself. He couldn't carry her safely on a single cable either.

He prayed that Julia would be able to finish the repair of the ship in time to pick them up. Meanwhile, they were stuck here, exposed to the deadly waste of a bygone civilization.

He looked down at Maggie's feverish face. She had been exposed for much longer than he and she was smaller. She might not make it until Julia arrived. He had to bury the spheres again to reduce her exposure. He had to approach the source of the deadly radiation.

Gently, he laid Maggie down on the ground, rode back to the spheres, and carried them one by one back down into the cave. He worked fast and tried to not think about what was happening to his body. *There's hope yet, he thought, Julia will be here with the ship soon. Maggie and I can both be put in stasis until we get to a hospital.*

When he came back, Maggie struggled to sit up. "Dad, I don't feel well," she croaked.

"I know, baby. Those spheres made you sick. Just hold on a bit longer." He shifted to place his own body between her and the spike at the center, as if his flesh would cushion her from the high-energy particles, would make a difference.

The loud whirring of propellers drowned out everything. Floodlights covered them. Julia had arrived with the *Arthur Evans*.

He carried Maggie, limp in his arms, onto the ship. His skin felt raw, burnt.

"Julia, get the stasis chamber ready. Maggie, don't be scared. You're just going to sleep for a bit."

Maggie was safely inside the chamber, and she nodded as she closed her eyes.

James was thirsty, dizzy, and very tired. He took a last look at the navigation panel. He was about to give Julia the order to take off and step into the stasis chamber himself.

Red lights blinked on the panel. *Hardware errors.*

A launch into planetary orbit was a delicate operation. There would be no tolerance for single-bit errors.

For a moment, pure rage – at himself, at the builders of this site, at the dead civilization of Pi Baeo, at the universe – overwhelmed him. They were going to die, killed by an ancient riddle that he could not solve in time.

"I'm not scared," Maggie, half-dreaming, whispered hoarsely.

He looked at her. There was a light smile on her sleeping face. She trusted him completely.

He knew what he had to do. He was ready, as he had always been without knowing it.

He leaned down into the stasis chamber. As she woke at his touch, he brushed the hair out of her eyes and kissed her on the forehead.

"Listen, Maggie, once I get the ship into orbit, Julia will send out a distress signal. The terraformers should pick it up and come to get you in a few months. Don't worry. Julia will keep you in suspended animation until they can get you to a real hospital. They should be able to fix you up good as new."

"I'm really sorry, Dad."

"It's all right, sweetheart. You're impulsive and you want answers, the same as me." He paused. "No, better than me. You've always known what really matters."

"When I wake up, we'll explore the universe together and tell everyone the stories of dead worlds."

He took a deep breath and held it for a moment. She deserved to know the truth.

"I won't see you again, baby. This is goodbye."

"What?" She struggled to get up. He pushed her down.

"It's too risky to let Julia fly the ship. The radiation is causing too many hardware errors. That's what made us crash in the first place. I have to fly the ship manually on analog controls. By the time I get us into orbit, the radiation sickness will have progressed too far in my body for stasis to be effective. I won't make it, Maggie. I'm sorry."

"No, let Julia fly the ship! You need to be in here with me. I can't lose both –"

He interrupted her. "You have been the best mystery I've ever worked on. I love you."

Before she could speak again, he closed the chamber cover.

He felt feverish and delirious. He imagined the merciless rays cutting into him, the residual heat of a dead civilization. But he was not afraid or sad or angry. Even as they were dying, the people of Pi Baeo strove to save those who would come after them. He was doing the same now for his daughter. This was a story that would always mean something, a message worth passing on, even in a universe that was cold, dark, and dying.

The comets were so bright in the sky. Everything would start afresh again.

He pulled back on the joystick, and felt the planet fall away.

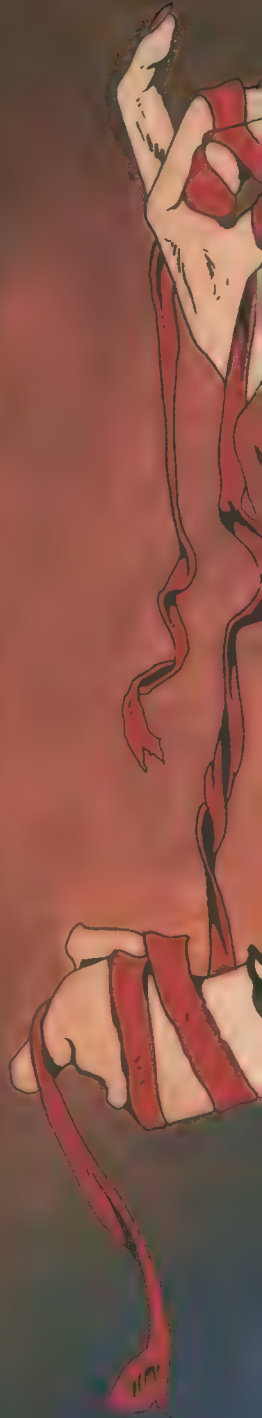
PRIYA SHARMA NEEDLEPOINT



THE LADIES AT COURT CALL
ME NEEDLEPOINT. PRINCESS
OF PINS. LADY OF THE SKEIN.

I WALK TO THE FAR END
OF THE GALLERY, TO MY
SEAT BELOW THE LEADED
WINDOW PANES WHICH CAST
THE BRIGHTEST SUNLIGHT.
I TAKE MY PLACE BEFORE MY
CANVAS, TACKED ONTO ITS
FRAME.

I PULL OUT ONE OF MY
NEEDLES AND GO TO WORK.





"Lady Agnes, calm yourself. You're upsetting everyone."

"I *am* calm, Your Majesty. It wasn't like this when I put my sewing away last night."

The queen's eyes narrow. She doesn't like to be contradicted. Anger makes me abandon caution. I hold out my box as evidence. She peers at it, pretending not to recognise what it is.

"Your precious sewing box," she says after a pause. "What's wrong with it?"

I ignore her sarcasm. It *is* precious, not just because it's rosewood but because it was presented to me by the king.

"The hinge is broken."

The queen tilts her head. Erasmus, her pet raven, mimics her from his perch. Carrion feeder. He'd pick my bones clean.

"You must have dropped it by accident and forgot that you did it." She feeds Erasmus a morsel of cake.

"I did no such thing."

"Pardon?"

She meets my outrage with a fury that elevates her face. It makes her skin lustrous. Her eyes shine. Perhaps this is why she and the king fight so often. As for myself, all it does is produce an unattractive flush and blunts my judgement. I wish I'd curbed my tongue. She might yet find a way to curb it for me.

I've no choice but to retreat. The loose lid rattles as I clutch my box to my chest. When I open it to search for my scissors, sunlight catches the inscribed plaque within.

To Lady Agnes, with the thanks of Albion.

Humiliation makes me want to cry. I swallow my tears. I don't like being the subject of scrutiny. Elizabeth and the other ladies-in-waiting stare, willing me to sob for their amusement. Reparation for feeling themselves accused.

Any one of them could've broken it.

I pull out a nightgown that needs mending from the basket at my feet. Sewing doesn't soothe me. I can still hear their whispers. Oh, to be free to get up and leave. To be away from here.

Tears sting my eyes. There's a tightening in my throat. I'd rather die than let them see me cry. I grip the handles of my scissors so hard that they dig into my palm.

The doors at the end of the gallery break open

and Jane Ashcroft runs in. I'm saved. Not that I like her. She's a doe of a girl with big eyes and slender limbs, who appears to be in perpetual flight. Doe indeed. Let the king's men fawn over her. She's a cur.

"My Lady." She curtsies before the queen. "Robert of Marshcombe is here." Jane all but jumps up and down. The queen watches her, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Not with fondness for a friend but amusement at a pet. She has more feeling for Erasmus than anyone, as far as I can tell.

"The king requests your attendance. Lord Marshcombe's men have accompanied him to court."

The ladies drop their playing cards, sewing and books. The mention of men sends them into a flurry. They're bored with the ones at court and the confines of winter. With squabbling, stitching and having our monthly courses on the same day.

"He's so handsome." Jane can't contain herself. She hops from foot to foot as if this could hurry the queen along. How wrong. Katherine doesn't rush for anyone. Not for Robert of Marshcombe, no matter how fair his face. Not even for the King of Albion.

The queen gets up and walks to the nearest mirror with a slow swing of the hips. She rearranges a coil of her dark hair as she admires herself. The ripe mouth. The strong nose. The fine arch of her brows. She strokes the delicate skin at the base of her throat.

"This gown is dreary. I'll change. Attend me."

It's some time before the queen's dressed to what she feels is the best effect.

We follow her out in order of rank. Not of blood or wealth but importance to Katherine. I'm poorest, oldest and last. Only there at the Albion's insistence. She only tolerates me at his command.

How she must hate me.

The guards open the doors and we file in. Chequered tiles spread out beneath our feet. Tapestries sweep from ceiling to floor. The fireplace contains an inferno.

The King of Albion sits on his throne. He's displeased that he's been kept waiting, the court forced to stand until the queen arrives. The only other person who's at ease is Myles Morrow, who

lies in a drunken sleep at Albion's feet. He's a joke in himself, being the most morose of jesters, despite his ribbons and bells.

The queen curtsies and joins him on the dais, her throne a smaller version of his. She leans in and whispers. He can't resist for long. After a moment he bends towards her to hear better. Then laughter erupts from his throat and booms around the hall. His broad chest shakes.

Oh, what a tongue she has.

Satisfied that she's soothed him, Katherine surveys her subjects, eyes sliding around the room until they fall on someone who makes her pause. I lean forward to see who's caught her attention.

Lord Robert of Marshcombe.

He and his men approach and bow low.

"Your Majesties, I'm the humblest of your servants. I've travelled far and claimed all we found in the name of Albion."

"I'm glad to have such intrepid adventurers back on sovereign soil."

The king extends a hand, a signal to advance. Lord Robert drops to one knee and puts his lips to the ring that dominates the king's fingers. The queen offers her hand, too. The ministers behind her cough and shuffle, their sensibilities shocked by this breach of etiquette. She doesn't care. Lord Robert's hand trembles as he takes hers and kisses it.

Robert has the royal blessing to take the floor. He claps his hands and his men bring in crates and jars. Jane's right. He's handsome. Seasoned by foreign suns but he still has the same hunger I saw when he was barely a man, before he went away. A poor nobleman seeking his fortune in a leaking wooden tub named *The Destiny*.

"It was night. The air was still. Stars shone overhead." Robert cast up an arm towards an imaginary sky, looking like a cheap player on a stage. "Our guide had let the fire burn down. The jungle stirred and the undergrowth parted. I could see eyes hidden in the leaves. They glowed like coals. The beast launched at us with bared teeth and claws like scimitars. I leapt up and grabbed my sword." He struck a pose. "We stared at one another across the dying fire and then I attacked!"

One of his men unfurls a yellow skin. The queen is rapt. She steps down and kneels like a commoner, runs her hand over the rich fur. The king has to negotiate the prone body of Myles Morrow to follow her.

Albion's a fine figure when he's at ease. It's only in motion that his limp becomes apparent. Albion feels his disfigurement keenly. The deep gash along his thigh where he was gored by the boar has long since healed. He hunts and jousts, chest and arms heavy with muscle. He's a demon on a horse.

It was an unfortunate day that Albion was maimed and his brother, heir to Albion, was killed.

"How brave," Katherine murmurs, fondling the pelt.

With each gift, Robert regales us with a tale designed to show his courage and prowess. You'd think he'd conquered this new world all alone.

The hall is strewn before he's finished. Chests of spices. Birds with swathes of plumes. Giant shells. Bolts of cloth and gold nuggets the size of plover eggs. Jewels for Albion's queen. The court walks among these wonders, admiring them. The queen is verbose in her praise.

A book catches my eye. *Animals of Lesser Albion*. I can't imagine this far country as any lesser than the isle of Albion. From the maps Lord Robert has presented, Lesser Albion is at least five times our size. I open the book. It's an exquisite bestiary. There's the great cat with amber eyes, the same creature whose skin now decorates the hall's floor. An armoured beast with a horn at the centre of its forehead. Birds in colours that put our wren to shame. I pause at a creature covered in spines. They stand up around its body like a saint's halo. I try to imagine the life of such an animal.

"It's a docile enough creature. The spines are for defence."

I look up. The man beside me isn't tall and fine, like the king or Robert, but he's solid and strong.

We both contemplate the page in silence.

"Does this thing truly exist?"

"Yes." He blinks, surprised by my sharpness.



"None of us like to feel threatened." I struggle with this apology for being so churlish. "Sometimes we do things that make us appear more frightening than we really are."

"Forgive me." He bows. "I'm the artist, Stephen Archer. Do you like my book?"

"Your work is very detailed. It must have been a perilous adventure."

Stephen Archer continues to study me. What would he record in his sketchbook? A woman on the wrong side of her prime. Eyes neither blue nor grey, clouded by years of wariness.

"I recognise a fellow observer. You don't like to be looked at, Lady Agnes, where most women revel in it."

"I didn't tell you my name." His attention flusters me.

"No. I find out the things I need to know."

I feel the colour rising in my face and wish I'd used more powder.

"Lady Agnes, I suspect there are creatures at court as dangerous as any in Lesser Albion."

He doesn't know how right he is. There are perils for the careless and the uninitiated. Racks, spikes and chains in the dungeons below. Many people who'd contrive to send you there.

"I've not the wit to survive here alone." Stephen tries to draw me out. "Will you teach me how?"

I watch the queen from a window on the south corridor. I'm not spying. I've always liked this view. I can see the topiary garden, the maze and the oaks beyond.

Queen Katherine is lauded for her accomplishments. Dancing, cards, poetry, the twin arts of love and hunting. Her prowess at falconry is uncontested.

Albion, hooded and held by jesses to her fist.

The queen's also an attentive gardener. It was the one thing I admired her for until I took a walk there. Her personal groundsman chased me away. *This garden's for the queen's private contemplation.*

She's a fool if she thinks no-one would know. My own mother made familiars of straw and clay and buried them. I've forgotten much of what she taught me but I still know how to prepare a tincture and tisane, a syrup and salve. The correct herbs for lovers, fever and purgatives.

The queen has a whole herbology behind those

locked gates, planted so as to hide or disguise. Wombweed flourishes amid the lavender. Wanderer's bane is entwined with the roses and hemlock grows beside hedge parsley. A harvest of bittersweet and bryony.

I watch as she stoops to pluck a leaf with a gloved hand and inspects it. My tormentor is so graceful.

"Lady Agnes."

I turn and curtsy. I'd recognise the king's voice anywhere. His retinue follows at a distance, divided into two camps. The adventurers are favoured as their tales are still fresh, whereas the courtiers' poetry has grown stale. They needn't worry. The king will tire of exotic ventures soon enough. Stephen stands alone. His independence is endearing. I give him an encouraging smile. The king notices, turning to look at Stephen and then back at me.

"Lady Agnes, are you well?" The king's always most solicitous for my welfare.

"Yes, Your Majesty." It's as bland as I can manage. His kindness makes me want to cry. I'm sick of crying.

Albion moves, blocking my view of Stephen.

"The queen says you've broken your needle box. I'll have it mended."

She's told him so he'll think I'm careless with his gift. Or rather, his mother's gift.

Look after Agnes when I'm gone, Richard. She'd patted his hand. Once crowned, his mother was the only person allowed to use his name. He became *Albion* then, in the tradition of his forefathers. He is *Albion*. *Agnes is a good girl, Richard. Make sure she gets my sewing box.*

I was a better nurse than needlewoman at that time.

"I beg your forgiveness, Majesty. It was an accident." The words stick in my mouth.

"No matter." I know there's more from his pause. "The queen treats you well?"

Always the same question, the same anxiety, as if asking it again will make it true.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"I suggested that she make you a bedmaiden..."

He doesn't finish. It's the highest honour, bestowed only on Elizabeth and Jane. Their word protects the queen's reputation. Her virtue's prized above diamonds. I don't want to sleep with

the queen when the king doesn't lie with her or go to the still warm spot he's just left. I'd rather share a mattress with a nest of adders.

Albion and I stand for a while, looking at her. She turns her face to the winter sun, eyes closed, basking. I wonder if she knows she's watched. She will do soon enough. I can hear the men muttering. There are no secrets. Everything is scrutinised.

"My brother would've loved her, wouldn't he?"

Albion's older brother loved himself above all else. Had Thomas lived, he and Katherine would've been well matched. Richard could've cast his eye to a wife as low as I and there would've been no shame.

"Is she happy?" Albion asks.

The pain of being in her thrall. I want him to be just Richard so I can pull him close and stroke his hair.

The thought of him has always heated my blood, even as a girl. He'd smile at me, careless of the effect.

"Who am I to judge the queen's happiness?" I sound bitter and reproachful.

"Yes, who are you?" He rounds on me. Richard has gone. Here stands Albion.

The milling courtiers are shocked into stillness except for Stephen, who moves towards us as though he's about to charge. I'm grateful for Robert who puts out a hand to stop him, with a frown and shake of his head.

The king thinks I'm afraid for myself. I *should* be afraid. The gossip's bridle is kept below, used on women for loose talk against the crown. The bridle has spikes on the inside. No, my fear is for Stephen, who'd risk his neck to defend me. I can't think of anyone else who would.

All Albion's anger drains from his face, leaving him pale and ashamed at his lack of gallantry.

"You are Lady Agnes, most beloved and most trusted," he says loudly. It's too late. Word of my rebuke will get around. "The best and gentlest of Albion's womanhood."

This attempt at royal reconciliation startles me. *The best and gentlest of Albion's womanhood.* A phrase used to describe his mother.

I'm not an effigy of her memory. A living icon of maternal love.

He lays a hand on my shoulder. Albion's regard is so heavy that it hurts me.

Queen Katherine sits beside me as I stitch. When I look along the gallery I see she's sent the other women away. Only one of Robert's gaudy birds remain. Erasmus has been deposed. The queen's affections are flighty.

"Your needlework's so fine," she muses.

It's the closest to a compliment she can manage. She needn't bother. It's my one skill. My work decorates pennants and bed hangings all over the castle. I stitch the king's shirts, work she passes off as her own.

"Womanhood's a chore," she sighs. "Do men suffer as we do?"

"Yes, but they're not quiet and confined. They can vent their frustrations." The words spill out. "They can go out into the world and be boisterous and angry and no-one thinks the less of them for it."

Laughter gurgles in her creamy throat. "Oh, Needlepoint. You're right, of course, but then you generally are, being so clever."

She sounds affectionate. I'd have thought this an attempt at friendliness had she not called me that.

"It's time you had a husband, Agnes."

I say nothing. Robert's bird shrieks and flaps, unaccustomed to the gold chain that tethers it to its perch. My sympathies are with it.

"Who shall we wed you to?"

I prick my finger on a pin and a ruby bead swells on my fingertip. I suck at it, hating that she can disconcert me.

"What about the Duke of Eastwater? He's looking to remarry." She says it as though it were a threat, him being so much older. I recall his wife, bless her soul, so happy that her man was so wise and full of wit. Marriage to him wouldn't be so terrible a fate. Even if my heart isn't in it.

"Whatever Your Majesty wishes."

"Or what about that Stephen Archer fellow?"

I pretend to be occupied with binding my finger with a rag.



"But then you can hardly have Stephen if you're married to the Duke, can you?" She picks up a skein from my box and weaves the crimson silk between her fingers. It looks like ribbons of blood. "Can you imagine what it's like being married off to one man and to realise that you love another? Do you think you could manage that, as clever as you are?"

She walks away, leaving my silk thread in a tangle on the floor.

Dr James Hart wears black velvet. He absorbs everything around him, light and sound, reflecting nothing. His hooded eyes and knowing smile suggests he understands things beyond our comprehension.

He's the king's chief scientist, practised in the arts of alchemy, philosophy and astrology. His charts influence Albion's policy, not that Hart's designs are political. His plans are philosophical. His ambitions are celestial. He seeks other worlds than ours.

It's rare that we're allowed into his laboratory. A stuffed fox stares down from its vantage point on the top of a wardrobe, a hen in its mouth. A series of bats' skeletons are fixed in flight upon the wall. A live toad croaks from an earthenware pot. The ceiling is painted with a map of the stars. Charts and scrolls are stacked on shelves. Dr Hart's books are so dangerous that they're locked away in glass cabinets. I read some of the titles. *A Compendium of Angels. Delavor's Complete Medicinal. The Mysteriorum.*

Everyone is engaged in their own intrigues and agonies. Jane plays with the ribbons lacing her bodice for the benefit of Albion's first cousin, whose eyes are transfixed by her twirling fingers. His sweetheart watches with wet eyes from across the room.

The swing of the queen's skirts catches my attention. Heavy silk, the colour of ivy. Her destination is Lord Robert, as he toys with Dr Hart's astrolabe.

"Mariners use a version of this to navigate," I catch Robert say to her. "The heavens guide us but there's no star in the sky that burns as brightly as you."

Albion is over at the spyglass so he doesn't see Lord Robert's hand touch the queen's for a moment. Nor does anyone else but me. The queen

doesn't flinch or reprimand him. Her glance is full of welcome. They've done this before.

A man may be as complimentary as he likes to the queen in the king's presence. It's polite. It's obligatory. To do so in private is another matter.

I move away, not wanting them to know I've witnessed this indiscretion. I pretend to be interested in Dr Hart's divining bones.

Stephen joins me, inspecting the sludge at the bottom of a mortar with a grimace. He snorts and stamps but doesn't speak.

"Are you bored? Don't you like it here at court?" I ask him.

"It's an education for a ruffian like myself." He lowers his voice. "Damn this place. I hardly see you. I don't get a chance to speak with you alone."

"The king plans a hunt next week. I think you'll welcome the distraction." I resist the urge to move closer to him, lodestone that he is. I whisper, "You're a novice. You've chosen badly in choosing me."

A rash reply. Being with him loosens my tongue. Stephen's not chosen at all, it's just the banter of a man who's been at sea too long.

"I don't waver once my heart has set my course, Lady Agnes. I've no time for dalliances. I'm no good at sonnets or songs."

"You hold us in contempt." Evasion and pava-
anes, steeped as I am in the court's ways.

"I speak plainly, even when it does me no favours."

"Life here is different to elsewhere. Frills and flourishes conceal insincerity. Love is an art."

"The men say you refuse all advances. That you have a secret lover..." He pauses. "But they say many things, most of which are nonsense."

Speak, speak. Have a man who heats your blood that you can touch.

Too late. Dr Hart hushes us.

"Tonight is All Hallow's Eve, the night the dead walk abroad. King Albion wishes me to summon them. We will speak with them."

"We'll see my mother, God rest her soul."

"With God's grace, Your Majesty, we will."

"You don't approve, Master Archer?" The king is looking at Stephen, who's frowning during this speech. It's curious. Albion's never paid Stephen any attention before and yet now he's keen for his opinion.

"We saw men in Lesser Albion who communed with the dead."

"And?"

"They frightened me. Some things don't belong in this realm."

"Come now, I expect greater spirit from a man who sailed on *The Destiny*. We men of science are bold. Hart and I are the true explorers here."

Albion turns his back on us, satisfied that Stephen's been cut down. Stephen purses his lips. Whatever he wants to say is safer buttoned up within.

Damn Albion's vanity. What does he care where I cast my eye? I'm not his mother. I'm not his wife.

"I've prepared a charm for each of you to place upon your doors," Dr Harts instructs us. "They're beacons for the dead, so they can orientate themselves. Stay locked in your rooms. The king and I will vigil here and await the dead with magic strong enough to draw them."

I don't want to touch Dr Hart's charm, a piece of shroud fastened to a piece of newborn's caul by a blessed pin. Birth and death. The passageways to our plain. It repulses me but we're not here at Dr Hart's request. It's on the orders of the king.

Stephen walks behind me as I leave.

"Lady Agnes, you've dropped your handkerchief."

I'm about to say *No, it's here in my sleeve* when he thrusts a piece of linen into my hand. I can feel a sheet of paper crackle within. Jane is watching us with narrowed eyes.

"Thank you." I feign indifference and turn my back on him.

I rush to my room, begging a headache. I smooth out the paper that's been crushed in my hand. I'd expected a letter but this is something else. One of Stephen's drawings. A portrait.

Love flatters me. My eyes are clear. I'm less thin about the face, less pinched and lined.

He's written a message at the bottom.

Marry me. I'll wait for your reply under the elm that you can see from the queen's gallery. Flash a lamp three times if the answer's yes. I'll wait there

until the second clock strike of the morning.

If there's no light, I'll leave this place and never trouble you again.

I hold it to my heart.

The queen's eager for us to retire. So am I. We fix Dr Hart's charms to our doors with coffin nails.

I lie on my narrow virgin's bed, twisting about as if fevered. I can't sleep. My fate relies on staying awake. Without my lantern, Stephen Archer will saddle his horse and ride into darkness. Such romance from a man who claims to have none.

Night transforms the world. Bleeds its colours so only silver and grey remain. The hunter's moon turns its pock-marked face upon me.

This walk, I've done it countless times before, so many times that I'm surprised I've not made a furrow in the floor. I feel like the covered lantern in my hand. I want to show Stephen the light concealed within. Once, twice, thrice. Yes, yes, yes.

I've not gone far before there's a sudden chill that raises the hairs on my forearms. Perhaps Dr Hart's charms have pulled back the veil between worlds after all.

When I turn and raise a slat on my lantern, I see it's not the dead that dog my steps but the living. Two figures in the corridor, just

outside the queen's chamber.

Katherine and Robert.

We three make a pretty tableau, staring at one another.

"Go," she orders him, "now."

Robert hesitates.

"Go." It's a command. She's no longer his lover. She's the queen. "And not a word. To save your life. Do you understand?"

Theirs is not a tryst. It's treason. Albion will send them both to the dungeons below.

Robert retreats with one last glance. Then he's away as if his heels are aflame.

"Jane! Elizabeth!"

They emerge, shawls askew, shaking off sleep, each from their own chambers. Not the queen's room.

"Hold her." The queen seizes my lantern and leaves it on the floor.



Jane, the doe, has the grip of a bear. Elizabeth holds my other arm. The queen wakes the other ladies. More hands restrain me. Then she goes to each window, peering into the night, ending at the window where I like to work. Then she turns on me, advancing like she's in battle.

"You're the king's spy."

"No."

"There's a man out there, under the elm."

"It's not what you think. He's my lover."

Lover. I stumble over the unaccustomed word.

"Liar," she spits. "You're laying a trap for me."

"No."

"Take her to her room."

I kick and thrash as they drag me to my bed. Jane twists my arm until I think it'll snap. Their nails dig in. Anne stuffs a rag into my mouth which I can't spit out.

"Hold her still," the queen orders.

They redouble their efforts when I resist. Their rings cut my skin.

"Pinch her nose."

The queen sounds impassive. Just as I think she means to suffocate me, she pulls the rag out. Elizabeth shoves something else in my mouth to keep it open. A small embroidery hoop.

Katherine hovers over me, my sewing box cradled in one arm. She takes out a needle with a gloved hand.

"You're a bane, Needlepoint –" she dips the needle into a jar – "simpering over your stitching and running to Albion behind my back."

Katherine moves with deliberation. She punctuates each word by anointing a needle – no doubt it's a concoction from her garden – and dropping it into my mouth.

When I was a child I got a fish bone lodged in my throat. I coughed and choked. My chest burned and stomach heaved. I can feel it now, the same small sharpness against the soft flesh inside my cheek. I baulk. The muscles of my throat tighten.

I have so many needles in my sewing box. They tickle my tongue. Prick my palate. They don't just sting. They burn.

Then, in go my pins.

My mouth is on fire.

I try not to for as long as I can, but I can't help it. I swallow.

I can hear the sounds of the ladies settling down to sleep in the neighbouring chambers. It evokes my childhood. My sisters bickering at bedtime. My mother administering supper and scoldings.

There's a scratching beneath my skin, from my crown to the tips of my toes. It makes me stretch and writhe. Irritation makes me swell. It's a relief when the needles puncture my skin. A drop of blood forms at the base of each as it pierces my flesh. My white nightgown is impaled and stained.

My reflection is a shocking glory. I look like a human version of Stephen's creature. The needles that cover me are spines that ripple as I move. Poison quivers at the tips. My studded hands glimmer with moonlight. The pins in my mouth glisten with blood and saliva.

Dr Hart's beacons glow, lighting my way. I can hear him and Albion in the laboratory, reciting ineffectual spells. I'll not go to them. They've no power to command me. I have other business to be about.

I bristle as I approach the queen's chamber. She's wronged me so many times. I'll make her feel my every point.

I will lie down with her.

Jane sleeps by her side.

I will lie down with her, too.

The ladies at court call me Needlepoint. Princess of Pins. Lady of the Skein. They bolt whenever they see me, eyes wide, like panicking horses.

I walk to the far end of the gallery, to my seat below the leaded window panes which cast the brightest moonlight. I take my place before my canvas, tacked onto its frame.

I pull out one of my needles and go to work.

Priya Sharma spends as much time as she can writing speculative fiction. She has a computer but prefers a fountain pen and a notebook. Her short stories have appeared in our sister magazine *Black Static*, as well as *Albedo One*, *Fantasy Magazine* and *On Spec*. Her work's been reprinted in *Ellen Datlow's Best Horror of the Year Volume 4* and *Paula Guran's Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror 2012*. We already have another story by Priya – 'Lady Dragon and the Netsuke Carver' – accepted for a future issue of *Interzone*. Meanwhile, you can read more about Priya and her writing on her website at priyasharmafiction.wordpress.com.

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BEYOND THE LIGHT CONE

O my Boyo, my love, my son. When you were a wee babe and you smiled and burbled at me with lips red and shiny as candy, I told myself this happiness would fill me up forever, that the bubbling joy would make up for any future sorrow.

I am so sorry.

Where you had been is now a massive emptiness, blacker than any hole between the stars, and I craved to fill it with news of you. So I went and did a stupid thing, only I didn't know it was stupid until I got a reply. Even before the message finished deconvolving, I could see it was bad. Very bad.

I found my shipmate Zweik, my last shipmate, in his makeshift chapel, a pinched access corridor deep within the gravitational antenna array. "That argument we had," I said. Zweik didn't respond, but kept curled up in the best approximation to kneeling he could manage in microgravity. I raised my voice to be heard over the din of the sending masses. "You know how stubborn I can be."

At last Zweik unfolded himself. Let me tell you about Zweik: he looked like a tree on a windswept hill, small and balding with twiggy limbs and a big twiggy beard. I tapped at my e-pad, pulled up the data stream, and handed it to him.

Zweik's eyes bulged and his pale face went a little paler. "You sent an inquiry, Marga. Got *her* attention." Zweik doesn't have a temper, not like me and mine, so I was surprised when he flung the e-pad against the wall, hard. "You brought this down on us," he said. "You've as good as killed us."

"So tell me," I said, unable to hold my tongue. "When we die, can we get to heaven from here? Hell? Or are even our souls trapped?"

You never cared for nothing, Boyo, but sports and drinking and fighting. Certainly not school, not history nor science. Maybe now you'll hear it from your ma.

Humanity has spread to the stars, colonizing nearby exoplanets. For material things – seed stock, tools, people – there is no way around Einstein's barrier. It takes decades to crawl from one star system to another at far below the speed of light. Humanity has become little ponds separated by vast, sterile deserts.

But information is a subtle thing. Information is what draws the light cone, because in the slow universe information travels by light, radio, x- and gamma-rays.

Nonetheless there is a loophole. A small loophole, admittedly, but one you can send a message through.

And we exiles are the messengers.

I must have known Zweik's given name years ago, but it evaporated from my memory. Umir and Oz were the ones to call him Zweik, mocking his formality, but now they were gone and only Zweik's surname remained. Me, even on the force I was never O'Connell or Detective O'Connell but

always Marga. At best Detective Marga. That's our lot as women. The only exception, Boyo, was your Major Hobson, from your stint in the local militia. She had been born with a given name, but cut such a fierce figure no one dared use it. Not even you.

I thought about asking Zweik his given name, just to bedevil him, as we pulled ourselves along handholds out of the access corridors, past the frosted forest of cryogenics and to the quiet of the galley. In the gravitational antenna array, the sending masses were suspended on superconducting rails, so their motion was frictionless, but – there's always a *but* – you've got to conserve momentum, no bloody physics fairy can spell that law away. And as the masses, hundreds of tons each, were driven back and forth, there was a turnaround at either end and the transmitted momentum caused the vacuum walls to shudder and creak. It sounded like the blows of an enormous hammer on a grieving heart.

In the galley, we only heard a muffled boom from the sending masses, overlaid with the rattle of the circulation fans. The galley stank, from eleven years of recycled air, recycled sweat, recycled piss and shit. The whole ship stank, and so did Zweik, and so did I.

"It's *Rahab*, Marga. Rahab."

"She's not threatening this time. This time she only wants a trade," I said, tethering myself so I wouldn't drift in the microgravity. "A worldline. Nothing to do with us."

But Zweik shook his head. "What were you thinking?"

I pursed my lips. "I was thinking maybe I'd hear from Salvati. He's always had news. Or the Nkawa crew. It's not as if I wrote her directly. 'Dear Rahab' and all that." I paused. "You know how down I'd been. It'd been another year, another whole year and no news."

He sighed. "Another year *ship time*. It doesn't map to clocks and calendars back home. The worldlines –"

"Could be five hundred years on Earth and my Boyo turned to dust, and me without a word."

"I thought you were a strong woman, Marga. Stronger than me."

"Just bigger," I said, which was true. My ma said of me, "You've got your pa's big bones. Thank God

you're gentle as a lamb." Not quite true, but I could control my temper, unlike my pa and unlike you, my Boyo, flesh of my flesh. You were bigger still and had an anger to shake the world.

Zweik sighed again. "What's this worldline she wants?" He picked up an e-pad, paged through the data stream. His eyes narrowed, and then he let out an involuntary guffaw. "She's mad, Marga."

I said, "Everyone knows that." Though we knew few crumbs about her, not even her real name, nor what year she launched, seeing how time plays tricks out here. She called herself Rahab, and the rest were rumors. A poisoner. A genocidal political exile. Leader of an obsessive religious cult.

Whatever she had been in the slow universe, she had forged a new and vicious reputation out here beyond the light cone.

.....
Here's how to draw the light cone. Zweik showed me enough times, until I was sick of it.

Make a big X. Draw an arrow going to the right. That's the direction of time. Draw another arrow going up. That's the direction of space.

Centuries ago, or maybe millennia, a mathematician named Minkowski, faced with the strange ideas of Einstein, drew such a diagram.

You stand at the center of the X. Any object going by has a trajectory, a worldline, its path in space as time flows. The slope of the line is its velocity relative to you. A horizontal line is the worldline of something at rest, relative to you.

The arms of the X represent the speed of light.

Anything to the left of you is in your past. Anything to the right is in your future.

And outside the light cone? Above and below in your diagram? Faster than the speed of light, it belongs to neither future nor past. That's where we live.

.....
To free up Zweik I offered to take his chores. I scraped the patina of mildew from the galley walls, mucked out the toilets, flushed the filters in the hydroponics stacks. Afterwards I wiped salty perspiration from my skin and sipped a bulb of water. The water had been distilled, of course, but my mind is a devil and whispered how the water tasted of sweat and piss, having circled through my body and Zweik's over and over and again, the way we visit the same stars over and again. Some-

times it took effort to drink a bulb of water.

And then from the hydroponics stacks I picked a salad and brought it to Zweik.

Zweik's fingers hovered over his e-pad, like a pianist ready to bang out Rachmaninov, only Zweik looked to have stage fright. He turned to me, and through his forest of beard I glimpsed a plea in his face.

"You sure you want to tango with Rahab again?"

A few years after launch – a few years ship time, that is – the four of us, me, Zweik, Oz, and Umir, we'd gotten warnings from other tachships about Rahab. And then we ran into her. Almost literally.

Rahab had heard that Zweik was a whiz with equations, working out worldlines for other tachships slingshotting around black holes. At faster than light, you can even dip below the event horizon, a risky maneuver but none of us had much to lose, and it'd cut months and years off our rounds.

To keep us tachship crew leashed, the clever fiends had transplanted a bit of foreign tissue into our bodies. We had to take weekly doses of immunosuppressants to stay alive, and if we didn't follow our prescribed duties the next med vault wouldn't unlock.

Rahab didn't care about schedules. She raved about vengeance against those who had exiled her, wanted us tachships to rally behind her. And she or one of her crew broke the ciphers for the med vaults, freeing her to work mischief.

She talked as if she were some pirate queen, which was mad. She couldn't board another tachship; old Einstein's teaching, *all speed is relative*, holds beyond the light cone as well. We travel faster than light relative to *everything*. Even other tachships. No light can catch us. The only thing we can detect is gravity and gravity waves, ripples in the fabric of space and time itself. The only other possibility is intersecting worldlines. A collision.

But Rahab craved a weapon for her ambitions. So she *demand*ed from Zweik a way to ram another tachship without destroying her own.

When Zweik said this was impossible, Rahab's response was to try to ram us anyway. We barely escaped with our lives.

"Is it impossible? The worldline?"

Zweik stared at the e-pad again. "No," he said with a sigh. "Damned hard. It'll need a massive –"

"Just try," I said. "You're the only one who can do it, I'm sure."

This wasn't flattery. Zweik, see, he was a maths genius, at one time a professional relativistic engineer. On close personal terms with Einstein's equations, you might say, and not the easy ones like $E=mc^2$, but the ones for gravity and bending the fabric of space and time, all tensors and differentiable manifolds. A plum pick for a tachship, a lucky catch.

Except of course for the victims of whatever crime he committed. He refused to talk about it, but we are all guilty of capital offenses. I myself admitted to two murders. It was all over the news. *Policewoman a killer. Decorated detective confesses to brutal crimes.*

I was blind to what you'd done, Boyo, until your Major Hobson came and hinted you were in a pickle. How long were you in her militia squad? Two years? Three? She'd found your ruthlessness useful when it came to teaching undesirables a lesson, she told me, and though you'd shown poor judgment she didn't care to see you "handed over to them bloody brick bastards like a goat for a pagan sacrifice," as she put it.

She hinted she had you under control, that you wouldn't be making any more "mistakes". And I couldn't bear to see you imprisoned or exiled. So I framed myself, and felt a sick relief when my trial ended. As they dragged me out I saw you in the crowd, your face close to mine for a moment. Behind you was Major Hobson, and I wondered briefly if she'd bedded you. She'd have been beautiful, if it weren't for her cold, dead eyes.

I couldn't say aloud the words I wanted, that I'd done this for you, that without me you had to be good from now on. Instead I said, "I'm sorry."

And you stabbed me, with the sharp words only a son can wield. "You're weak," you said, almost spitting, and my heart faltered and wasn't ever the same.

I never saw you again, my Boyo. Instead I saw the vast green-and-tan mottling of Africa, as the space elevator at Kilimanjaro took us up and up, through the thin sheath of atmosphere delicate as a tissue. I saw the blue curve of the Earth and above us stars like diamonds.

Though we fly from star to star to star, that was the last I saw their light. When we transitioned

beyond the light cone, the ship was imbedded in a pouch of space. An Alcubierre-Maldacena-Weber metric, Zweik told me it's called. Within the pouch it's like normal space. But it's this pouch, this bubble, that allows the ship to travel faster than the speed of light.

No, not *allow*. We have no choice. We are eternally and always traveling faster than the speed of light.

The physicists and engineers found an obscure quantum transition to hurl us from the slow universe, the universe within the light cone, to the tachyverse beyond the light cone.

At a price, of course.

We can never go back, can never transition back to the slow side of c . Something about entropy, Zweik tried to explain.

Beyond the light cone we listen to ripples in the fabric of spacetime, messages carried by gravity waves. We pick up data around one star, travel to another, and retransmit them. A kind of interstellar post, if you like, only the postal carriers are all murderers trapped in faster-than-light purgatory.

The data stream is ciphered, of course, but we slip little messages into it, meant for the other tachships. We trade stories, histories, pass on any news we've managed to decipher. Me, I tried to catch news of my Boyo. Oz followed his football, centuries late, and Umir wrote lovely songs and sang them to the stars.

Zweik cared for none of that. When I first met Zweik he let me know he had religion and had sworn off sex. "Do you really think the Lord Almighty sees us out here?" I asked him. "Do you not think we're traveling so fast, we're just blurs even to Him?"

Zweik took offense, though I meant none. My own ma was keen on religion, and she was the best person I did ever know, though I didn't take after her that way. I like a bit of drink and a body to warm me and so I looked around the ship and took in Umir, who had a sweet face and who told the best dirty jokes.

The problem was, Umir wasn't of sound mind. He hated the immunosuppressants, said they were part of 'their' mind control. I was always begging him to take his capsules.

After we finally shook Rahab off our trail, Oz

and Umir and me, we got drunk.

I passed out, but Umir got the notion to cut the foreign tissue out of his own body. He got a knife and started jabbing at his stomach.

Oz, pretty drunk himself, grappled with Umir, and Umir stabbed him in the neck, then finished butchering his own stomach. They then both proceeded to bleed to death.

"You couldn't stop them?" I shrieked at Zweik, when I woke up. "You were sober!"

Zweik couldn't look me in the eye. "He was waving that big knife around."

I felt like killing Zweik myself. But I had never killed a man, not in all my years as a police, and I was proud of it. As much as I hated him at that moment I wasn't going to start.

Zweik said he felt awful and tried to give up his equations as a kind of penance. But he couldn't. "As a sin, you have to admit, it is a fairly feeble thing," he told me. It was the only pleasure he had besides praying.

So it wasn't hard to convince Zweik to work on the worldline for Rahab. He hunched over an e-pad, raising and lowering his tensor indices, hammering functions with his derivatives and winding up his integrals.

.....
A few shifts later we rounded sigma Draconis, our laser gravitometers twitching as they netted tiny bumps and indentations in the local metric for the data engines to deconvolve and store. Later, around a different sun, we would reconvolve it for the sending masses.

But I couldn't stop hovering over the data stream. The unencrypted bits were mostly gossip and letters home to generations left behind and multi-character hypertexts about the loneliness between the worlds. As always, I was looking for news.

Zweik berated me for making myself crazy. The glacial pace of deconvolving didn't help either.

It helps to think of a message not as a string of letters but as a string of notes, as a song. And no note is pure, but must be built out of many different frequencies. The shortest notes are the most complex, like honeyed pastries with dozens of layers of infinitesimal crusts, while the purest of musical notes, like a mother singing lullabies to her sleeping son, take a long interval of time

to construct.

It reminded me of our conversations, Boyo. How sometimes over supper I'd talk at you, talk and talk and talk and your eyes glazed over, not a syllable getting through. But then I added a word, just the right word, and it was like a key to unlock the whole thing, and you nodded. Perhaps you just feigned agreement with your ma.

Beyond the light cone, the convolution of information, knitting together of frequencies, is as maddening and capricious as a conversation between a mother and her wayward son. It might take as much shipboard time to convolve and send a short message as it does a long one. It could take weeks or months, sometimes even years and several passes through a system, for a particular message to deconvolve. Others took only hours or days.

I found another message from Rahab, one that gave my heart a squeeze. *You want news? I can tell you more, if you give me what I want. And here is a taste.*

I read that message over and over, and clutched my arms over my heart.

Your son is out here. With me. Convicted of murder. And to prove it...

She told a story she had from your lips, Boyo. How you'd killed one of my men friends. Sayyid. My bones froze when I read that. I had thought Sayyid had simply skipped out, what with all our fights. But I remember how you, fifteen at the time and full of blustery fury, never liked him. I didn't want to believe it but the words rang my soul. It could have been like that. And no one but you could tell this tale.

O my Boyo, my poor son. They caught you. You must have killed again. My knees turned to jelly at the thought. I'd hoped you had turned from your brutal ways, Boyo. But you didn't, you didn't, and they exiled you as they did me.

I read and reread the message and I searched the data stream, to see if I could find any more crumbs.

I didn't, but I found something else.

.....
Zweik walked in on me in the galley as I was fanning myself, blanched, and turned his head. "Put some clothes on, woman," he muttered.

"This is all a glorious gift from the Lord," I said,

stretching out my arms. I admit, since losing both Oz and Umir I missed a body pressed against mine, and sometimes I took offense at Zweik's stubborn celibacy.

He wiped at his forehead. "Marga, the homeostat –"

"Is fine," I said, sighing. "But it'll be appreciated if you'll finish that worldline for Rahab." He froze when I said those words, as if he'd put his foot in a steel-toothed trap, and I nodded.

He picked up an e-pad and stabbed it with his fingers. From behind I said, "You'll be wanting to look at our southwestern quadrant. A little below the ecliptic. The strain on the metric is a particularly lovely false purple in the soft x-ray band. And the flux on the hull back there is truly impressive." My heart raced as I said it. "The same way it was before, when Rahab tried to ram us." Our collision should have been in the blink of God's eye, but out here beyond the light cone, time is a trickster. And just like the data stream, the intersection of our worldlines would be convolved, stretched out.

"We'll have to outrun her again," he said at last.

"You used a black hole to evade her," I said. "She's on to your tricks by now, I suspect."

"The worldline she wants," he said slowly, "won't give her what she wants."

"What does she want?"

"She wants...it's called a closed space-like loop. A worldline that intersects itself."

Despite the heat, I felt a cold tingle on the back of my neck.

"Maybe she's suicidal?" I said, trying to make my tone light. "Good riddance, I say."

"But it makes no *sense*," Zweik insisted. "Look, to the slow universe, a closed space-like loop would meet up in the past. Violating causality."

Causality is one of those fancy university words Zweik loves to taste in his mouth. It means a thing can't happen before the thing that made it happen.

But causality beyond the light cone is twisted and knotted, a maze through a thorny hedge.

"You think she wants to change the past?"

Zweik shook his head. "She can't. Her worldline would intersect the past, yes. But to close the space-like loop, she'd have to slingshot around a *massive* black hole. She'd have to use Sagittarius A-star." That's the one at the center of our galaxy.

"So?"

"So she and her ship might appear in the past, in a way. But the intersection would have to deconvolve, the way her attack on us takes time to deconvolve. The higher the momentum, the longer it takes. That's how causality is satisfied. To make her space-like loop she'd have picked up so much momentum it'd take centuries to deconvolve."

"So you don't have to worry about defending poor defenseless causality," I said, rubbing my temples. "Can you finish her worldline now?"

Zweik wiped at his forehead, then nodded slowly. "God forgive me." He started to turn away, then stopped. "One more thing. The latest med vault didn't open."

For us, the loss of one med vault didn't matter. We had surplus available drugs, for months if not for years, as they'd planned for four and it was only us two left. The automatic ciphers kept us on a rigorous schedule, clever enough to determine if we'd successfully ferried messages back and forth between star systems, but not clever enough to count how many crew were alive.

But it gnawed at Zweik. I had a cousin, good at chess and sums, but he needed his world neatly ordered and fell ill if something was out of place. Zweik was like that.

So it was not surprising when a shift later he found me out. "What did you snip out of the data stream?" he blurted as I came out of the hydroponics stacks, my arms full of greens.

"Snip what out of what?"

His face got even redder than it had in the heat. "Something is missing," he said. "A sharp edge. Deliberately deleted. It has your fingerprints all over it."

"Turned into a detective, have we?" I said. "Going to arrest me, officer?" I held out my hands to receive the cuffs.

But he kept at me, and I must admit, after eleven years in exile, seven of them alone with Zweik, I had trouble keeping things to myself.

"It's a rumor going around the tachships," I told him with a sigh. "That there is indeed a way to transition back. According to some clever boffin, maybe more clever than yourself –"

He blinked at me. "Back? Back where?"

I pushed at his shoulder. "To the slow side of the light cone."

He made a rude sound.

"If you say so," I said. "All I know is what the data stream held. Probably Rahab saw it too."

"But then why – " Blink. "What else?"

I sighed again. I'd only meant to delay him, as he'd find out no matter what I did. "Something about a closed space-like loop." I added quickly, "And I know what that means. I may be a big dumb police, but I listen, and I've learned a few things from you. That's why she wants to loop round a black hole. She means to go back to her beginning." He hesitated, and I pounced. "So you say it won't work. Let her chase this goose. Keep her away from us."

But he just kept shaking his head, and muttering. No matter how much I begged him, he wouldn't relent.

So I did another stupid thing.

One shift, after Zweik had fallen asleep, I snuck a look at his notes. I found the worldline. Zweik was a brilliant man, a genius as I told you, but a trusting man. Didn't even bother to encrypt it.

I put it into the data stream. My heart was in my throat as I listened to the sending masses, pounding away at space time.

We made our rounds, scooping up ripples of gravity, flying to another star, thumping out a signal on the metric again.

I underestimated Zweik.

He came to me, haggard, half-naked. If it weren't for the crazy look in his eyes I'd have been pleased, thinking he'd finally regained his manly desires. But it wasn't sex that tormented him.

"I was a fool, Marga," he said, his voice a rustle like dead leaves. "I should have erased my e-pad."

"My son is aboard Rahab's ship," I said, trying to keep my voice calm and quiet. "My Boyo." Zweik jerked around, as if I'd touched a live wire to him, then shook his head. "She told me things only he could know!" I insisted.

"I thought you understood how dangerous Rahab is."

"What do you imagine will happen? Do you think she'll transition back and declare herself pirate queen of the slow universe? Either she runs and hides," and this is what I hoped you'd be smart enough to do, Boyo, "or they arrest her when she shows up."

He shook his head. "That rumor you heard... Any attempt to transition back is unstable. It would just rip apart her AMW metric."

I thought my heart would burst when he said that. "Unstable?" I said weakly. "You're sure?"

"And you faked the attack!" Zweik shouted, slamming a hand against a wall. "You spoofed the homeostat and the external sensors to make me think Rahab was ramming – " He stopped to take a deep breath. "How long ago did you send the worldline?" he demanded. I looked away. He grabbed me and started shaking me. "How long?"

I smacked him one, right good across the face, sent him tumbling backwards. He shook his head, and I saw a purple bruising already starting to come up.

"That'll be a right nice black eye," I told him. "If you're going to put a hand on me, chappie, it best be in love and not in anger."

He looked at me one last time. "I see reason doesn't work on you either," he said, then turned and shot off.

"Zweik?" I called after him. "You going to pray in your chapel? Zweik?"

With a heavy heart, I followed after him, dragging as if we had gravity again. I looked in the gravitational antenna array, but he wasn't there.

"Zweik!" I called. "You're a bit long in the beard to play hide and seek."

He wasn't hiding. I found him in astrogation.

"What are you doing?"

"Setting an intercept course," he muttered. "I'm sorry, Marga."

"Intercept? You mean collision? With Rahab?"

"She's probably lying about your son. But we have to stop her. She's the whore of Babylon who would drink the blood of the world." He paused. "I'm going to have to lock you out."

I glided over and grabbed him. I've tackled my share of men in my day, though never in microgravity. He clung to the astrogation console, trying to enter the cipher, while I slung my arm around him to get him into a chokehold and shake him loose. At last I pried him off and we both tumbled in what seemed like slow motion until we slammed into a far wall.

I loosened my hold. But I heard a whistling sound coming from Zweik's mouth, and he clawed at his throat.

"Oh no, Zweik, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I must have fractured his windpipe.

"Destroy..." he whispered. "Destroy..."

I hauled him back to the infirmary as quick as I could. In the service I'd been taught how to perform an emergency tracheotomy. But by the time I reached the infirmary he'd stopped breathing and his eyes were glassy and he had no pulse.

I did the tracheotomy anyway, then pounded his chest and blew air through the little tube. There was blood everywhere, blood had soaked his twiggy beard, but Zweik didn't respond.

There was nothing I could do but curl up right there. I never cried in public, that's what you learn as a police, but I was alone now. O God, how I cried.

I had never killed a man before. I'd hurt my fair share, shot some with rubber bullets and tasers. But I'd never killed anyone.

I blubbered for a while, then cleaned myself up, wrapped Zweik in his sleepsack, and pushed him through the airlock. Course he couldn't drift beyond the bounds of the AMW metric, but it felt like a burial. And my brain sparked and I finally remembered Zweik's first name. Alain. Alain Zweik.

When my head cleared enough, I sent a reply to Rahab. *Believe me or not, you can't transition back. It's unstable.*

Then I got a message from Rahab.

My breath caught in my throat as I read it, like I was breathing barbed wire. I thought I would choke then and there.

Oh, Detective, I'm counting on that. Your son and I sweated and toiled for the bloody brick bastards and they threw us away. Goats for a pagan sacrifice, we were. This will be my revenge. Our revenge. Your son thinks it's the best joke.

I nearly keeled over.

- bloody brick bastards -

That sparked my brain again, and I recalled Major Hobson's first name.

Rachel. Major Rachel Hobson.

Rahab.

When she had told me about your troubles, Boyo, she pulled out her lipstick and applied it while hinting about the people she'd had killed. "All in the name of order," she said, sarcasm cold

on her tongue. She had seemed to relish knowing I wouldn't denounce her.

Then I understood what Zweik had been trying to tell me. If Rahab closes her space-like loop at Earth and initiates a transition back to the slow universe, her AMW metric would rip apart. But to close the loop she'd have to slingshot around the supermassive black hole at the center of our galaxy, and build up enormous momentum. With that momentum and the high frequency components it imparted, it will take centuries for the intersection of worldlines, hers and Earth's, to deconvolve; it would take centuries before anyone on Earth even noticed the build up of flux. But the eventual release of enormous amounts of kinetic energy would be catastrophic. Billions would die, and Rahab would have her final revenge.

Zweik had been right. I should have listened to him.

How many had she killed, before they sent her out here?

And then it hit me, as hard as if I'd been struck by one of the hundred-ton sending masses, only it was the thought that had started bubbling up after Zweik's death, and had just now finished deconvolving. I thought Zweik was the first I had killed, but that was wrong. I had killed plenty. I had shielded my son, and he had killed again. I let Umir go unwatched, and he took Oz with him: two more deaths. O, there had long been guilt itching at the back of my skull, but I had never fully faced up to it.

And if I let Rahab go...

But I have Zweik's notes, and the course he programmed into astrogation. And I have enough immunosuppressants to last for months.

O Boyo, my Boyo, this is the hardest thing for a mother to say. You are lost to me forever. I thought I protected you out of love, but it was only cowardice and convenience. Now I must set that aside and hunt Rahab, and you, across the starlanes and around the black hole at the center of the galaxy. This is not because she *stole* you from me; I don't hate her for that. I don't even hate her for stoking the fires of your rage. No, this is different. Somewhere outside of space and time and cause and effect I must finally, *finally* do what is right.

O Boyo, my Boyo, I love you, I love you, forgive me.

COMING SOON : TTA NOVELLAS



20,000 words • art by Rik Rawling



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- 3: Cold Turkey by Carole Johnstone (39,000 words)
- 4: The Teardrop Method by Simon Avery (26,000 words)
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THE REMEMBERED

BY KARL BUNKER

Call him Sam; call her Sarah. Their real names were nothing like this, of course, being instead a series of clicks made by a chitinous beak, accompanied by the display of certain colors in the chromatophoric cells of the speaker's face. This is using the word 'face' loosely, of course, since the species we're speaking of were aquatic invertebrates, with a roughly cylindrical head and body and six tentacles extending from the end opposite the head.



But Sam and Sarah will do nicely as names, because they were very much like any two of us.

Notably, their species had two sexes, essentially analogous to our male and female. It also happens that the circumstances of their species' biology and environment were such that it was evolutionarily advantageous for parenting duties to be shared by mother and father in the context of a stable bonded pair. Because this was an intelligent species, they couldn't be mindlessly driven by instinct, so the formation of pair-bonding between couples wasn't a blind, rigid, instinctually driven thing. Rather it was something motivated by more diffuse sensations within the minds of the bonded pair: sensations of comfort and pleasure when they were together, longing and distress when they were apart, a feeling of belonging to one another. All of which, of course, is just a way of saying that this species was capable of love. Sam and Sarah were in love.

As one would expect of an intelligent species, the diffuse sensations that were Sam and Sarah's love permeated both their higher and lower brain functions.

They spent a lot of time engaged in non-reproductive mating, their bodies sometimes inadvertently slipping into ready-for-sex displays when they were together, whether they were in a place that was practical or decorous for mating or not. Their friends would notice this and tease them about it, as friends do. That was their lower brains acting.

And each of them was full of respect for the other's intelligence, character, and creativity. They spent days talking together about their lives and their work, seeking the other's opinion and thoughts. That was their upper minds at work.

All intelligent creatures must inevitably be drawn to new information, valuing the creation of fresh, unexpected ideas. The 'unexpected' aspect of this shades into what we call humor, so again Sam and Sarah were like any two of us. They enjoyed each other's sense of humor tremendously, each thinking that the other was the funniest, cleverest person he or she had ever met.

So Sam and Sarah were in love. Because intelligent creatures will grow and change throughout their lives, it may be that eventually they would have stopped loving each other, but at the time of

this story there was no hint of this; they were very much and unreservedly in love.

Being aquatic puts a number of impediments in the path of developing technology. In the early days of their history, these squid-creatures learned to chip flint to make tools and weapons, and they gathered together in large, permanent communities that practiced agriculture and animal husbandry. A major breakthrough in their nascent technology came when they discovered they could manufacture objects of many sizes and shapes and many different materials through biotically induced precipitation and accretion of sea-borne minerals. Colonies of certain algae-like bacteria living in mats over a substrate would excrete minerals onto the substrate in an ever-thickening layer, producing structures whose properties can be tailored by controlling the shape of the substrate, the types of bacteria, and the minerals in solution in the surrounding seawater. In time, even some pure and alloyed metals could be manufactured in this way.

But many things, notably the large-scale production of metals, were difficult or impossible as long as their technology was confined underwater. Long ages passed before fire was even known to exist, and more ages before squid-scientists were able to set up above-surface research stations where they could create fire and begin to investigate all the myriad secrets it could reveal about nature.

Many of those early investigators, like our alchemists, were looking for magic, only to discover science by accident. And many of them ruined their health and their eyesight by holding their heads above water for too long, building and using their precarious constructions for focusing the sun's light, for setting fire to things, for seeing what happened when this or that rock or mineral was subjected to heat. But progress was made. Electricity was discovered and harnessed, and, at the time of our story, electronic devices were becoming commonplace.

Sam and Sarah met each other through a shared interest in materials science. Sarah was an artist, and Sam an engineer. A traditional and clichéd division of roles by gender perhaps, but what can you do. That's who they were. Sarah liked to make

small and beautiful things, and Sam liked to make bigger things that were useful.

Sarah was a sculptor, creating figurative and non-figurative works that were richly colored, intricately detailed, weightlessly graceful. She was beginning to experiment with transparent materials, and she'd heard that the company where Sam worked was developing new processes for accreting transparent silicates. Hoping that some of their methods would be transferable from engineer's laboratory to artist's studio, Sarah coaxed and cajoled Sam's superiors into letting her visit him in his workshop.

When Sam first saw Sarah, lithe and sinuous and with a quality that, in his mind, he instantly named "uncontrived femininity," he let the top of his head flush red in an ostentatious "I am ready for sex" display. This was rude of him, rather like an ogling leer, but Sam was young and healthy and something of a lech. Sarah tightened her beak, kept her color scrupulously neutral, and started talking about her work, the materials and processes she used, the results she'd obtained so far, what she was hoping to achieve in the future. Very soon, Sam's unseemly flush faded and he found himself deep in a discussion of deposition rates, the care and feeding of microbial mats, tectosilicate crystalline structure, the place of iridescence in the history of squid-people art. He was fascinated, entranced, intellectually challenged.

In passing, Sarah mentioned a marbling effect she'd achieved by mingling nacre material with sintered metal.

"Is that possible?" Sam asked.

"I have a piece in my bag," Sarah said.

"A piece? Of your work?"

"Yes, a small sculpture," Sarah said. She was not feeling very impressed with Sam. He hadn't said much during their conversation that was of any use or interest to her, and she hadn't forgotten the red flush he'd greeted her with. She took the sculpture out of a compartment of her bag and handed it to Sam.

Sam went silent, staring at the object in his tentacles, turning it over and over to see it from all angles. His skin went to a neutral color, and then pale, almost white. It was the color of someone lost in deep emotion; sorrow, loss, sometimes love.

Sarah's beak tightened again. She thought that

Sam was overdoing it to the point of absurdity. Did he think that all these childish displays would impress her? She held out a tentacle to take her sculpture back, knowing that Sam would pretend not to notice for several seconds. *I bet he's going to tell me I'm talented*, she thought. She anticipated the words, heard their syrupy condescension echoing in her mind's ear. *You're very talented, Sarah*, he would say.

Because there's nothing about being a species of invertebrates with tentacles that makes one member of that species incapable of condescension, or another member unlikely to resent condescension, or even of resenting it – perhaps unjustly – in anticipation.

Sam noticed that Sarah was waiting to take her sculpture back, and he passed it over, holding onto it with four of his six tentacles until she took it. As Sarah watched him, his color went back to neutral. This seemed to take an effort of will, and his tentacle-tips stayed a pale gray for several seconds longer.

"It's beautiful," he said, and nothing more. His eyes stayed fixed on the sculpture, as if he were wishing he could hold it for a few moments longer.

Sarah's cynical regard for Sam began to falter. Could it be that his blanching display was genuine and not contrived? And now that he seemed to be forgetting to keep up his exaggerated masculine posturing, he suddenly looked rather attractive, with an unassuming flexibility to his body, a charmingly uncertain fidget at the tips of his tentacles.

"I haven't eaten yet today," Sarah said suddenly. "Is there a good place for lunch around here?"

So Sam and Sarah left the laboratory, swam down the main thoroughfare, turned into a small side street, and hooked two tentacles each onto the perches at either side of a small table in an outdoor café. As they shared a salad of imported mollusks and mixed greens, Sam began to talk about his own work. His employer was involved in building the equipment for an upcoming expedition. It was to be the first step in the largest and boldest mission in the history of the squid-people: the construction of the first permanent base on dry land, with facilities to prepare and support explorations further inland, and to build permanent manufacturing plants. He made sweeping,

unselfconscious gestures as he talked about the environment of air: the wondrous lack of friction, allowing a whole new approach to the design of moving mechanisms; the thermal insulating property of air, which meant that a furnace could be hot enough to melt iron, and with a little shielding, the temperature a few body-lengths away would barely rise at all; and all the endless varieties of plants and animals to be found and studied, the geology, the meteorology...

"And the lack of breathable water," Sarah said. "The absence of any buoyancy, so everything weighs a hundred times what it ought to, the temperature extremes that can freeze you at night and cook you during the day, and always being one tiny malfunction, one pinhole leak away from a horrible death..."

Sam made a flicking motion with three tentacles at once, brushing away all such pedestrian concerns. "That doesn't matter," he said. "*We have* to do this. The gateway to the whole *universe* is up there, not down here. There are risks, but everything worthwhile has its risks, its dangers..." He stopped, thought for a moment, and then said, "No, that isn't true, is it? Your art is worthwhile, and I don't suppose there's much danger connected with that."

Sarah's face showed the involuntary flutter of colors that were the squid-people's analog to laughter. "Well," she said, "I once had a sculpture shatter when I was polishing it. It gave me a nasty cut." She held up a tentacle, showing a small scar near the tip.

Sam took Sarah's tentacle in one of his own, bringing it close to his face. Then he was holding it gently with two, three, four tentacles, and looking into Sarah's eyes.

There was a long silence at Sam and Sarah's table, during which two of the café's wait staff sniggered silently at each other over the randy young couple, their food forgotten, the tops of both their heads flushing a livid red.

"I want to see more of your work," Sam finally said.

"I have lots of other pieces at my studio," Sarah answered. "Is right now a good time for you?"

By definition, all intelligent creatures will want to understand the world around them. And inevi-

tably, the questions of a curious mind will outstrip the ability to find answers. Why do the tides move the sea; what causes the heat of undersea volcanoes; what is the nature of the sun that moves above the water during the day, where did all the world come from; and so on. And when reason and rationality seem helpless in the face of questions like these, it will sometimes happen that fanciful stories will fill in, acting as placeholder for the more scientific theories to come in future days. Thus do the squid-people have a mythology. In Sam and Sarah's day these old stories have long since been abandoned as belief systems, but they are still remembered and loved for their poetic beauty and imagination.

In one of these legends there was a god, handsome and noble, though not one of the senior gods in his pantheon. And he had a wife, known for her beauty and intelligence.

Call him Jason; call her Janice.

Jason and Janice loved each other dearly. Indeed, the bond between them was the envy of all the other gods, and they were often criticized for being too much like mortals in the depth and passion of their love.

Janice and Jason were like squid-people in shape, of course, though larger and vastly more powerful. The legend tells that it was decided one day that Jason would be given the task of exploring the dry land continents, so that all the secrets of this mysterious world could become known to the gods. To the squid-people, especially in the early days of their history, the realm of land was vastly more unknown than the realm of the sea ever was to us. For them there was no equivalent of boats or ships, no equivalent to wading or swimming, no equivalent to fishing the sea and drawing one's livelihood from it. So the gods decided that this vast unknown should be explored and charted, with the plan that the gods would some day extend their dominion over it.

To make Jason ready for his expedition, the cleverest craftsman among the gods created a marvelous thing: it was something like a squid-shaped suit of armor, made of seashell material, filled with seawater and watertight throughout. A helmet of clear nacre covered Jason's head, and the armor over his tentacles had many articulations that were so perfectly crafted that not a sin-

gle drop would leak out in a hundred years of use. The magic of another god gave Jason the ability to move over the land by swimming through the air as if it were the sea.

So Jason, eager to explore and dutiful to the wishes of his senior gods, donned his beautiful armor, gave his wife a parting embrace, and set out for the shallows, the shore, and the unknown wonders and dangers beyond.

The legend goes on for some length about Jason and his adventures. He encountered beasts of all sorts; creatures that strode about on two or four legs, things that slithered and scuttled on the ground, flying animals analogous to birds, even burrowing things that lived under the earth in tunnels. Many of these monsters were even more gigantic than the god Jason, and many of them attacked him, looking upon him either as a potential meal or as an intruder upon their domain. With his various weapons of obsidian and gold Jason fought all those who assaulted him, defeating one after another in battle after battle.

Finally there came the ultimate monster, more powerful than all who had preceded it, and more malevolent. This monster was a god in its own right; a monster-god who ruled over a land of monsters. The thing lumbered up to Jason, belching out its anger and hatred with a roar that shook the ground, and instantly the two were locked in combat.

The contest went on for days, or perhaps weeks. Jason fought with the strength and skill of a god, and with a relentless determination and resolve that went beyond godliness. By any sensible measure he was outmatched, and he should have been defeated a hundred times. But he refused to be defeated, and he fought on. In time, the battle began to move in his favor; the monster-god began to weaken, though it too refused to accept defeat, driven on and on by bestial rage.

And then, to his horror, Jason saw that his armor was leaking. The seawater, upon which the life of even a god depended, was slowly dripping from the joints of his suit. Jason's will and resolve may have made him indomitable, but his armor was only lifeless matter, and it was failing.

Jason knew he was going to die. The only way he might survive would be to break off his fight with the monster-god and flee with all his speed

back across the continent to the sea. But of course his god's pride allowed him no such retreat, so he fought on. More days passed in earth-shaking combat. Down and down Jason beat his opponent, until at last the thing was flat to the ground, helpless, with Jason holding his obsidian sword over it, ready to cleave it in two.

By now the water was almost gone from Jason's armor. He hadn't been able to take a breath in more than a day; his skin was cracked and bleeding, and his dried-out eyes left him nearly blind. He held his sword high...then hesitated...and then lowered it, dropping it to the ground. He bent over the monster-god, cradling its bloodied head in his tentacles, and spoke to it, clicking his words out into the toxic, unbreathable air.

"I have lost the will to kill you, friend monster," Jason said. "I bear no malice toward you. We have fought long and well, and while we were fighting I believed it was my duty to kill you. And when I knew I would die from fighting you, I believed that my honor required that I stay and fight and die."

Jason faltered, slumping to the ground beside his foe. "But our fight is over and I am nearly dead," he said, his beak-clicks weakening, the colors on his face fading. "I find myself questioning, thinking new thoughts. I find myself thinking that there are things more precious than honor, than duty, than victory, than combat, than conquering a new world. More precious even than being a god. I am about to lose all things, but there is only one thing whose loss I truly regret." And then he said one final word, and died.

The monster-god climbed painfully to his feet and looked down at Jason. He regarded this being who fought him in grand, godly battle, had finally defeated him, and then had called him friend and spared his life. Not even a monster's heart can be completely impervious, so he mourned Jason. He laid the lifeless body out on the ground with all the tentacles neat and straight, and said his monster-god's version of a prayer over him. And then, since he was after all a god as well as a monster and had certain godly skills, he took the last bit of seawater that was left in Jason's suit, formed this water into a bubble, and placed inside this bubble the sound of Jason's last word. Then he gave the bubble of water to a sea bird, with instructions to

carry it far out over the ocean before dropping it.

Out over the sea the bubble was carried, and then dropped, and once in the ocean it continued its journey, still magically intact. It drifted on for miles under the sea, until finally it came to its destination, and there it opened, releasing its cargo of sound.

Because the language of the squid-people was a combination of sound and visual display, when the bubble of seawater opened in front of Janice it contained only half of a word. But Janice could guess the missing half.

Grief beyond imagining consumed Janice. She flailed her tentacles and tore at her own flesh. The beak-clacking of her shriek of anguish sent shock-waves through all the oceans of the world, and the color cells of her skin radiated such furious light that the sea around her began to boil. Her fellow gods thought that she would die, consumed by the ferocity of her pain. But she did not die. In time the intensity of her agony diminished, and then she became quiet.

For a long period she was so still and quiet that some wondered if she had died after all, but then she began to move. With calm purpose, she set out for the shore. When she came to the shallows and could go no further, she summoned up all her powers as a god, and then powers a thousand times beyond that. In the terrible extremity of her grief, she became capable of things that no god had imagined possible. She called out to the sea itself, and impossibly, the sea obeyed her. It swelled up, writhing and moving like a living thing. It rose up over the continent, roaring inland in an endless flood that covered mile after mile of land. And for mile after mile Janice swam with the moving sea. She swam and swam over the once-dry surface, until she found what she knew was there: the body of her husband, laid out on the ground. And frozen onto his dead face was the other half of the word whose sound-portion had been carried to her and was still in her ear; the word that, reassembled, was "Janice".

Janice lay down beside Jason, taking his body with all her tentacles, and held him. She held him and held him, and still holding him, she told the sea to retreat, to return to its bed, leaving her behind to die in the cruel, unbreathable air.

This was long, long ago, the legend says. But still

the sea remembers Janice and her grief. It remembers the time it rose up at her command and served her, carrying her inland to her beloved. And to honor her, to act out its remembrance of her love and her pain, twice a day the sea rises up a little ways, makes a small foray up onto the dry land, and twice a day it retreats again.

.....
And so it was natural and inevitable that the project that Sam and his colleagues were working on was named after the ancient god Jason.

Time passed for Sam and Sarah. Their love developed from the bright first flame of passion and lust into something more deeply rooted and permanent. Certain subtle changes took place in their brains; whether these changes should be called a cause or an effect of their love is an unanswerable question, but they were changes that would never fully be undone, as is the case with all creatures who love.

According to the customs of their people, they held a small ceremony that was attended by their friends and families and marked the fact of their bond as a couple. They set up house together; they talked about where they wanted to be in their lives before they had children.

Over the course of many months, the inshore base was constructed just above the high-water mark of a sandy beach. Teams of squid-people working in electrically powered water-filled tractors with manipulator arms hauled up huge prefabricated sections and assembled them. Once the base was completed it was filled with seawater, to be kept clean and breathable with filters and aerators. Teams of scientists, engineers and technicians inhabited the base in shifts, and mobile expeditions were mounted and sent further and further inland. All of this was dangerous work, of course.

As a research engineer, Sam wasn't an obvious choice to be a member of one of the deep inland expeditions. But he'd spent time at the inshore base, had become one of the best drivers of the tractor vehicles, and was young, strong, and healthy. So when he volunteered for one of these missions he was eagerly accepted. The mission was to last twenty days; a long separation for any young, loving couple, and the parting embrace of Sam and Sarah was passionate and tender.

Sam had no adventures to compare with the mythical Jason. He encountered no monsters, fought no epic battles. And when he died, it was because of a simple accident. The terrain was rough, and Sam's tractor slid down the bank of a dry streambed, struck a rock, and lost its water. The other tractors in the expedition couldn't navigate the steep slope to reach him in time. Sam left his tractor and tried to drag himself across the ground and up to the nearest working vehicle. But the ground was loose gravel, and he was barely able to move any distance at all before the cruel, unbreathable air killed him. Watching him, the other members of Sam's team could see he was dead. And they could see a half-word, faintly imprinted across his face in the muted colors of dead chromatophoric cells. The sound portion wasn't there, but it could be guessed; the word was "Sarah".

When Sarah heard of her husband's death, she couldn't shriek out her grief with godlike fury. She couldn't send shockwaves around the globe with clacks of her beak or radiate burning heat from the color cells of her face. And she couldn't summon up the sea itself to do her bidding, to rise up and cover the land to carry her to Sam's waiting body. None of these glorious and terrible expressions of agony were open to her. She could only do what any creature in pain can do, which is very little. For a long time she barely ate, barely spoke to anyone, barely lived. And for a long time she made no more sculptures.


The squid-people continued their exploration of the land, in time extending their dominion over it, just as the gods of their legends had dreamed. Metal refineries, foundries, and forges were built, and their technology made grand leaps forward thanks to all the things made possible by access to the air and dry land. Their science and knowledge grew, and their explorations eventually reached out into space and toward the stars. Many generations passed.

The story of Sam and Sarah would normally have been forgotten. Many explorers die for the cause of knowledge, and many lovers lose their beloved. But this once, the story was not so completely forgotten. After a long period of mourning, Sarah began to sculpt again, and in time she


became one of the most revered artists among her people. Over the centuries, the power and grace of her work continued to be valued, and her pieces were preserved in museums. And among those who studied her art and learned about her life, it was accepted as fact that her grief at the loss of her husband was a defining force in the development of her genius as an artist. Again and again in her later work she returned to the theme of Jason and Janice, and the story of the parallel tragedy in her own life became as lasting a thing as the sculptures themselves.

Like the tides of the sea, some things endure.

Karl's work has appeared in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Cosmos*, *Andromeda Spaceways*, *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, *Abyss & Apex*, and elsewhere. In the past he has been a software developer, jeweller, musical instrument maker, sculptor, and mechanical technician. He lives in a suburb of Boston, MA with his wife, a dog, two cats, and sundry chickens and koi. He's also on a first-name basis with a variety of local wildlife, recently including a hummingbird moth. He currently earns a living writing in other genres, and doesn't write nearly enough science fiction. A meagre website is maintained at karlbunker.com.



WARNING





Dark denizens of the night to infiltrate your dreams deeply of their art they will open your eyes to the darkness inside yourself.


A disembodied spirit fighting to be reunited with his vampiric body... vampires braving the void of space in search of a new home. A vampire with no recollection of his mortal life...

All this and more you will find in these pages - six variations on the vampire theme, bound together by their protagonists' burning lust for blood.

- EXTRACT -

The last of the mist floated into the room and settled before the terrified girl. Never in her life had she felt as frightened as she felt now. In spite of her earlier resolution, she began to doubt whether she had what it would take to let the vampire bite her...

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STRIGOI

LAVIE TIDHAR

One day in spring
a strigoi came to Central Station.

A Shambleau. Her hair was done in a style then popular in Tong Yun: long dreadlocks woven with thin, flexible metal wires that corresponded to an invisible engine, and moved like snakes in the air about the girl's head, extending lazily from her skull.

She had vat-grown blue eyes, her hair was brown, woven with gold that caught the sun.

Her name was Carmel.

A patch of new skin on the soft lower flesh of her left arm could have once been a tattoo. That tattoo could have testified that she had been previously captured and accordingly marked. She stepped out of the general transport RLV on the rooftop of Central Station, disembarking with the other passengers, and stopped, and breathed in the rare air of Earth.

You who have never been to Manhome! Remember the words of the poet Bashō, who wrote:

*Sip blong spes
Planet Es hemia!
Ea blong hem i no semak
Ol narafala ples*

Translated roughly as 'Ship of space / Earth it is! / Its air is unlike / That of any other place'.

Though the term Manhome had fallen from favour, and a more proper designation would have been Humanity Prime or, as the Others sometimes called it, the Core.

Regardless.

The Shambleau called Carmel came to Central Station in spring, when the smell in the air truly is intoxicating. It is the smell of the sea, of salt water and tar, coming from the west; it is the smell of orange groves, of citrus fruit in bloom, coming from the distant plantations of the Sharon region; it is the smell of the resin or sap that sometimes drips from a cut in the eternally renewing adapto-plant neighbourhoods surrounding Central Station, sprouting like weeds high above the more permanent structures of the old neighbourhood; it is the smell of ancient asphalt heating in the sun, of shawarma cooking slowly, drenched in spices, on a spit, close to a fire; it is the smell of Humanity Prime, that richest and most concentrated of smells. There is nothing like it in the outer worlds.

This was Central Station, that majestic space port rising out of the thin sandy ground of the old neighbourhood between Tel Aviv to the north and Jaffa to the south. An hourglass shaped monstrosity, it rose beyond the clouds, and on the flat surface of its roof the RLVs and sub-orbital flights touched down and took off, relentlessly, off to Gateway or old New York or Newer Delhi. The girl, Carmel, stood there for a long moment, her eyes closed, taking it all in: the strange and unfamiliar gravity, the relentless push of the sun, the gentle, modulated pulling of the wind, the whole thing surprising, unpredictable, a planet-wide atmospheric system that wasn't even *digital*.

The pulse and surf of the Conversation hit her then. On the way over – on those slow months from Tong Yun, on Mars, all the way at last to Gateway, there in Earth Orbit – she had done well filtering the Conversation to a minimum, near starving herself. She had travelled on the *Gel Blong Mota*, that most ancient of cargo craft traversing the solar system. Quiet was what she had wanted.

But now the Conversation exploded around her, almost overwhelming her. Ever more concentrated, here on Earth. Different, too. Odd, archaic protocols intermingled with the impossibly high-bandwidth *toktok blong narawan*, the moving data of the digital intelligences known as Others. Here, the part of the Conversation to come from the Outer System – from Jettisoned and the Oort Cloud and Titan and the Galilean Republics – was faint, diluted. Mars was a quiet murmur. Lunar Port was a cry in the night, the Belt twinkled with dozens of loose strands. But Earth!

She had never imagined the Conversation as she experienced it just then – the *nearness* and yet the *distance* of it, the *compressedness* of it all. Billions of humans, uncounted billions of digitals and machines, all talking, chattering, sharing at once. Images, text, voice, recordings, all-immersive Memcordist media, games-worlds spill-over – it came on her at once, and she reeled against it.

"Are you all right, dear?" a kindly voice said. It was a Chinese-Martian woman, with bright alive green (natural? A quick scan did not reveal a patented signature) eyes. "Is it the gravity? It can be hard to adjust, the first time."

She lent Carmel her arm, to lean on. Carmel gratefully accepted, though she was afraid. She shielded the woman out as much as she could. Being this close to a human's node was a temptation she was afraid to follow. Her hunger, her weakened state, did not help. She needed to feed, and soon.

And Earth was like an all-you-can-eat Tong Yun City buffet.

"Thank you," she said. The woman smiled and they walked down the marked path, to Disembarkation. Carmel tensed, but only a little, as the gateway systems scanned her. Her internal networks pretending she was something she was not.

A ping on her internal node: approved. She let out a breath. Carmel and the woman rode the elevators down to the lower levels and the RLV was being off-loaded behind them.

"This is my third time on Earth," the woman said. She spoke easily, taking Carmel into her confidence as if she did that every day of her life. Red Chinese, but not Tong Yun; one of the innumerable communes that had sprouted up over the centuries in the Valles Marineris, in the shadow of Olympus Mons. "This is my third time on Earth, isn't it wonderful? Of course it is an expensive trip but my ancestors are here, in Central Station." She smiled a quick delighted smile. "Yes, isn't it strange? They had come from China and from the Philippines, to work for the Jews of Tel Aviv at that time, and stayed. Here. The old neighbourhood. I still have relatives here. My name's Magdalena Wu, but I am of the Chongs of Central Station. It is strange... I grew up on Mars. We farm tomatoes, water melons, medical marijuana, *waetbun kabij*... Our greenhouses spread out for miles underground, there is a joy you don't expect, perhaps, in tending to all that greenery. They say Mars is red but when I think of it, when I think of home, I always think of it as green. Is that strange?"

Carmel, perhaps overwhelmed, perhaps at ease with this chatty, older woman, said nothing.

Magdalena nodded. "So much demand for *waetbun*," she said. *Waetbun kabij* – Asteroid pidgin for garden variety cabbage. "My family emigrated in the Century of Dragon." That meant, Carmel knew, the century when Dragon first

established his/their/its strange colony on Hydra. Momentary images, by reflex, poured over her: public images of Dragon's World, the endless termite built warrens, the thousands of disposable dolls moving through it on their unknown purposes, each a node linking the whole into something greater than its parts, the Other known as Dragon, a digital entity with a strange fascination with the *physicality* – what the games-worlds people sometimes called Universe-1. "We grew – not rich, but comfortable, on the cabbage trade. Such a useful plant! It is a great source of vitamin C and indole-3-carbinol. It is used in nearly every kitchen. A neighbour started a kimchi factory, then married into the family." She shrugged. "We make do," she said. "Enough for me to travel here twice before. To see where it began. From Central Station, we went to the stars. Isn't that something? It's strange, their outdoors don't feel quite real, don't you think? Oh, you haven't felt them yet. But their outside feels smaller than the inside of our greenhouses. All those miles... I love to walk them."

They had reached a level within the giant space port. The doors opened. They both went out. "Level Three," the woman said. "It's like a miniature version of the Level Three Concourse of Tong Yun City, don't you think? It's so quaint."

Carmel remembered Level Three. The Multi-faith Bazaar. The games-worlds nodes. The droid arenas. She had... She had roamed there, for a time. So many churches, and so many of the righteous took it upon themselves to hunt strigoi.

They had almost caught her once. A crowd had gathered. She had been drunk on feed. "Shambleau!" they cried. Pointed. Jeered. Awed and repulsed. Then casting stones. Worse. Denial of Service attacks, crude but effective. Blocking her from the Conversation. Cutting her off from her feed.

"Do you go to Tel Aviv?" Magdalena said. Seeing Carmel's confused expression: "Jaffa? No? Farther away?"

"Here," Carmel said. Speaking felt strange. She had not spoken in all her time on the ship. "Just... here," she said.

"Outside?"

Carmel just shrugged. She didn't know.

As if taking pity on her, Magdalena nodded,

took her hand, gently, in hers. "There is a small shrine here," she said. "It's for Ogko, but... We could go there together, if you like. Where do you need to go? Do you know?"

"I..." The thing that drove her across space and to this foreign, alienating place for a moment eluded her.

"You don't talk much, do you," Magdalena said. Carmel smiled; she hadn't expected to.

Magdalena smiled back. "Let's go see Ogko," she said. "Then we'll see what we can do about you."

Arm in arm, they walked across the vast concourse, towards the Multifaith Arcade.

There is a shrine to Ogko in most places nowadays. Though Ogko did not approve of shrines. He was the most cantankerous of deities, a reluctant messiah. If you subscribe to the Alien Theory of Spiritual Beings, which was briefly popular around the time of the Shangri-La Affair, Ogko would be considered, alongside Jesus, Mohammed, Uri Geller and L. Ron Hubbard, as an alien entity. Remember Fermi's Paradox? The reason we don't see aliens *out there*, reasoned the proponents of the AToSB, is because they're *here*. They walk – and preach – among us.

In *The Book of Ogko*, a man tells the story of having encountered an alien being, an energy creature called Ogko. "I made him up," he wrote. "I took his shape and form from water and leaf, from the damp earth of the Mekong and from the flight patterns of the wild battle drones of the Golden Triangle. He isn't real. Neither am I."

Ogko, he cheerfully admitted, was a liar. Yet his philosophy-of-no-philosophy, his strangely delighted view of an insignificant humanity, "a shower of bright sparks against a vast darkness" as he once put it in a more flowery moment of language, somehow took hold.

He endured. His message – "We don't matter – only to ourselves" – strangely resonated. And little shrines to this fictive, playful entity, if it had existed at all, kept springing up in odd places, on street corners and plantations, in the Exodus ships and in the underground warrens of Mars, on the lone mining ships of the asteroids and in the games-worlds and virtualities of the Conversation.

In Central Station, tucked alongside an Elronite Temple, a Catholic church, a mosque and a Church of Robot node, there was indeed a small shrine. Potted plants were left there, in a profusion of colour and scents, flowers and vines, and on a small pedestal sticks of incense burnt, and candles in various stages of completedness stood, some burning, some extinguished. Magdalena lit a small candle, then called to her hand-luggage. A suitcase promptly appeared in the distance, racing on tiny wheels towards the shrine. When it arrived, Magdalena patted it absentmindedly before extracting from it a small parcel. She left it alongside a pot of geraniums and a half-starved Venusian Fly Trap. Growing in Magdalena's pot was, of course, a small, white bone coloured cabbage.

Carmel watched the Venusian Fly Trap in horrified fascination. It was like staring at a mirror. The thing was starved of feed. And thinking of feed, which it was impossible not to, the presence of this Martian woman, Magdalena, was becoming increasingly more difficult: her node's pathetic protection meant nothing to Carmel, she kept getting snatches of images, data packets, random noise coming off the woman, like the scent of baking bread, making her mouth water. It would be so easy to...

Unthinkingly, she took a step back.

Magdalena, turning around, said, "Are you all right?"

"I should go," Carmel said. Speaking quickly. Panic rose through her like tiny bubbles. All the noise, the sound of the Conversation she had been keeping out, burst in on her. "I have to – " She didn't finish the thought.

"Wait!" the older woman said – but Carmel was already turning, running, across the vast hall of Level Three, seeking a way out; seeking escape.

Night time in Polyport, Titan. Beyond the dome purples fought with reds as a storm raged. Inside Polyphemos Port itself the air felt hot, humid. She walked down the narrow, twisting streets, avoiding the entrances into the underworld as she stalked the shadows.

Feed on Titan was more diffuse. The local networks thronged and signals were broadcast and captured through the strings of hubs floating out

in solar space, but they were fainter here. Rich feed came from Mars, the Galilean Republics, Earth...but Carmel didn't care for that. What she needed was more immediate. What she needed was a lot more *intimate*.

Polyport, built of ragged stone, greenery everywhere, thick vines climbing the one and two storey buildings. She had come here a runaway, hitchhiking on a cargo ship that passed through the Belt, on its way to the Outer System. That's when it had happened to her.

No one is born *Shambleau*.

It was a dirty old ship, the *Emaciated Saviour*: a mile-long rock-and-metal trans-solar transport, hacked out of space rock in the docks of Mars orbit, centuries before, its hull pockmarked with countless impacts, its corridors dank, the lights often didn't work, the recycled air never smelled fresh, the hydroponics gardens were fitfully maintained.

A jungle grew in the belly of the ship. Ancient servitors tried and failed to control its growth. There were rats there, too, an Earth breed that had since spread everywhere, and fire ants, tiny organisms whose bite burned like a flame and could not be eased.

Cargo came from everywhere. In space, cargo was a religion all by itself. It came from Earth, shipped into orbit to the massive habitat called Gateway. It came from Lunar Port, and it came from the Belt, from Ceres and Vesta where the wealth of the Belt poured. It came from Tong Yun City and from across Mars: inner system cargo, en route to the outer system.

Everything had been fine until that long voyage, that crossing of space. From Mars, stopping only at a few undistinguished rings and habitats, they made the long journey to Jupiter's moons, and from there the even longer crossing to the second gas giant, Saturn. When they had got to Ganymede she had been too frightened to get off; the Galilean Republics had tight immigration controls and she was already infected.

They finally booted her off the ship on Titan.

She had hitchhiked a ride on the *Emaciated Saviour*. Room there was aplenty, and the crewman who picked her up was decent enough. He was a Martian Reborn, four-armed in the manner of the Followers of the Way, and did not demand

she follow his faith. His name was Moses. She had gotten used to his smell, oil and soil and sweat, to his soft voice, his gentle manners. He was sexually undemanding. Most of the time she wandered the ship, explored the maze of corridors, ventured into the hydroponics jungle. After a Belt childhood the ship felt immense: a whole self-contained world.

The attack came without warning, once they'd left Mars. Carmel was, of course, noded. The background hum of the Conversation was all about her, wherever she went. Like most people her age she had experimented with memcording but found that not only did she value her privacy, few were interested in watching a continuous feed of her life. Like most people her age she had ventured into one of the games-worlds at some point, and for a time worked as a liaison-entertainment officer at a lunar base in the Guilds of Ashkelon universe, converting her games-world earned currency into universe-1 money. There were a lot of alien species in the GoA universe and the role of a liaison-entertainment officer could sometimes be demanding, if educational.

Apart from this Carmel's node, and the resultant network filaments growing out of it, were filled with the usual data; no more, probably, than a few exabytes in total.

All this was to change.

Carmel was walking through a service corridor. It felt disused. The air felt cooler here, dust hung motionless in the air. It was dark and the light ahead flashed brokenly on and off, as if spelling out a secret message.

The woman came at her from a door that wasn't there. The wall opened like a mesh of spider silk pulled sideways, smooth metal somehow torn aside like a bead curtain. Carmel couldn't see the woman clearly. She was short, slight of build. Smaller than her. Hardly a threat. The woman said, "*Shambleau*." Something terrified and terrifying in equal measures in her voice. The word coursed through Carmel's mind, through her node. It multiplied like a virus. It broke up into fragments that mutated and mated with each other, multiplied, grew, split, spread, crawling through her node, her wires, her mind. Carmel was frozen. Somehow, she couldn't move. The woman came close to her. Held her. Her mouth

was on Carmel's neck. She bit her. The bite did not hurt. It felt cold, then hot. Carmel swayed. The woman held her as she fell gently to the floor. The woman knelt beside her, her mouth on Carmel's neck.

A terrible, exhilarating sensation. As if the woman had somehow pulled a Louis Wu on her, a low electric current stimulating the pleasure centres of the brain, releasing high quantities of dopamine. Carmel swooned as her mind was being devoured, data, all her most secret intimate trivial recall sucked up, devoured:

In the mining ship with her father, who lets her use the controls, for just a moment –

Visiting the Ceres Botanical Gardens and being amazed by the flowers, that there could be so many –

Watching an episode of *Chains of Assembly*, the Martian soap, where Johnny Novum kisses Tempest Teapot-Jones as Count Victor, unseen by them, watches in hatred –

First sexual experience with a boy her own age in the 'sea' – it's what they call the salt water pool on their little home world, the asteroid Ng Meru-run – the tips of his fingers feeling rough on her chest, an unfamiliar heat inside her –

In the Guilds of Ashkelon universe welcoming her first alien, assuming an abstract avatar for the guest, an ambassador from a powerful guild in galactic north, an insectoid thing, but his pincers on her are the touch of a frightened boy, her age, and she guides him, feeling power –

Trying to learn to play the guitar, and failing –

Floating in zero gravity on the mining ship and singing to herself, a Sivan Shoshanim song that is popular that year –

Cooking for the family in the small kitchen off their quarters on the long corridor of the long-house, a rare feast, for the birth of her sister's first-born they slaughter a pig –

Strigoi.

The word rose like a bubble in her paralysed mind. She was losing the memories, losing her own self, awash in the joy, the unbearable *pleasure* of the woman's touch, that current of electricity in the brain as her node was raided, her data sucked away by this...*thing* that had an ancient, terrible name, a word she once heard her sister use, and her mother shushed her angrily –

Shambleau.

The word evoked in her a sudden repulsion, a horror even the dopamine could not counter. She struggled against the woman, her limbs suddenly free. She could no longer recall who she was, who she had been. But the woman was surprisingly strong, she pressed her back, and Carmel could smell her then, the fear and the hunger and the arousal that wafted off of this human-shaped creature, and she tried to cry out but her voice didn't work.

The strigoi's teeth left Carmel's neck. Then, as if reaching a difficult decision, which Carmel only later, much later, realised, the strigoi bit her again.

This time it was different. Carmel subsided against the cold hard floor of the service corridor. The rush of data flowed over her, *into* her, a sensory outpouring that left her numb, gasping for virtual air. Not only herself, but bits of other people, entities, all intermingled, memories without anchor, and for fleeting moments she was like a slideshow of humans, she was a Lunar shopkeeper and a Martian field worker, she was a Re-Born in the ancient Mars-That-Never-Was, four-armed and bronze-red, standing on the canals. She was a human with an Other flesh-surfing him, she was a robot priest at a shrine for St Cohen, she was a Hagiratech hunter on Jettisoned, she was an Exodus ship departing the solar system, she was a human from Manhome itself, swimming in a vast and alien ocean...

She came to in the dark. The strigoi was gone. She was alone. Her head hurt. When she touched her mouth it felt delicate, raw. When she opened it against her skin she hurt herself. Her teeth had grown, she had two canines that lengthened. She was frightened.

She had a new awareness of herself. It came and went, it grew on her in the days to come. She knew herself from the inside, the whispering of the filaments spreading like a cancer from her node, filling her, invading her. Her node grew, spread, it was becoming her. She had returned to the cabin, where Moses was asleep. She lay beside him. She fell asleep and, when she woke up, he was gone. She ran a shower and watched herself in the mirror but she no longer needed a mirror. She could see herself reflected in virtuality, every part of her, and she was filled with other people's

ghosts.

Night time in Polyport, and she was hungry, the words of a poem running endlessly on a loop through her head.

The poet Bashō, who had once encountered a Shambleau on his slow voyage through the solar system, reputedly at a lonely outpost on Mars, wrote:

*Oli saksakem save blong yumi
Oli saksakem maen blong yumi
Oli haed long sado*

Awo!

*Olgeta kakai faea blong yumi
Olgeta kakai save blong yumi
Oli go wokabaot long sado*

Awo!

*Sambelu. Sambelu. Sambelu.
Oli kakai faea. Oli haed long sado.
Olgeta Sambelu.*

Which, translated, reads something like: 'They suck our knowledge / They suck our mind / They hide in the shadow / Oh! / They eat our fire / They eat our knowledge / They walk in shadow / Oh! / Shambleau. / Shambleau. / Shambleau. / They eat fire. They hide in shadow. / They are Shambleau.'

She was hungry on Polyport. She had hid on the *Emaciated Saviour* for months, Moses had avoided her, the crew shunned her but the ship was haunted by more than one presence and she was not persecuted. There were Shambleau on that ship, there were ghosts in the digitality, there were bloodied rituals in the bowels of the ship, acts of dread *nakaimas*, the word, in Asteroid pidgin, for black magic.

They booted her out on Titan, at last, spreading across the ship, driving away the dark presences, she amongst them. They were released on Polyphemus Port, and she was a long way from home, the sun cold and distant in the sky.

She hunted. Confused. A Carmel with others' memories, others' knowledge behind her eyes. She saw him walk down the street, weaving

drunkenly, his node open, vulnerable, low-level broadcasting to anyone who would listen. She approached him, her hands shaking, her legs felt weak. He turned, smiled at her. "Beautiful young thing," he said fondly. "What are you doing on this desolate moon?"

She reached for him. Her hand touched his shoulder and he froze, his system compromised, and she came closer to him and sunk her new fangs into his neck, draining him.

His mind was rich, so rich! He was an artist, a weather hacker, his mind full of swirling storms, of rain, of wind and power. His name was Stolly – "Like the vodka" – and he was a Polyporter, a Titanite born and bred. She gained arcane weather hacking routines, memories of a party he had once attended, where the Memcordist Pym had been, bits of poems, agalmatophilia, which was the sexual impulse strongest in Stolly – an attraction to dolls, mannequins and statues – a modest talent for gardening, a love of the powerful red wine made from the grapes of subterranean Titan.

She was feeding too much, she suddenly realised. She was draining him. She pulled away, out, putting a barrier between her node and his, her teeth withdrew. "Wait," he said. He sounded drugged. "I..." He blinked. "I need you," he said.

Then came a time of interdependence. She moved in with Stolly. He was pliable to her, addicted. "Shambleau," he'd say, his voice a mixture of wonder and desire. They would lie in his bed, the white sheets stained with sweat, and he would stroke her hair, worship her, and she fed on him, learning to control her need, to measure it out, in dribs and drabs, to give as much as take, so that he existed still, but faded.

It was a crime. Made worse by the fact she could not control it. The filaments had spread through her body, she had been turned. Perhaps the one who turned her, the one on the *Emaciated Saviour*, did it out of spite, wanting to pass on the dark curse of strigoi. But Carmel came to realise that a more likely explanation was that the nameless Shambleau had drained her too much, and could only save her by turning her. Now she, too, was a mirror, reflecting others yet casting no reflection herself. She fed on others' minds,

on others' data, the hunger always in her. Who first developed strigoi? She never learned. Some ancient Earth weapon, released into the wild. Strigoi could be valuable, if held in captivity. Bounty hunters sought them out, military factions sometimes made cruel use of them. In her mind, images of mobs, rending Shambleau limb from limb. Whether it was a real memory or an amalgamation of data gleaned from the Conversation she didn't know, but people frightened her.

There were stories of Shambleau acting as muses for the people they fed on. Inspiring their work. Certainly there was something strange, unique about that sort of intimate sharing of data. And Stolly seemed happy, adoring. He was working on a new installation, *Stillness Within A Storm*, and yet...

He was fading before her eyes.

She was draining him and she couldn't stop. The only answer would be to turn him, she knew, and she was unwilling to do that, to make copies of herself would be an obscene act. She was old before she was young. Her escape from home brought with it no freedom, only a new kind of imprisonment.

Her life on Titan came to an end on the eve of Stolly's unveiling of his new installation...

Carmel blinked. She was alone on the Level Three concourse. Bright lights, sounds of explosions and cheering from the battle droid arenas. Masses of people, so many, moving to and fro, food courts with unfamiliar smells, in the distance the Multifaith Bazaar, that Martian woman, Magdalena Wu, lost to sight...

Central Station.

It felt like an alien world.

She was not sure what was outside. An alien planet, and she a landing explorer, hesitant before setting foot down on the planet's surface, under its alien air. She would plant no flag here. Already she could discern in the Conversation around her hints, clues to the one she sought. Outside was another world, an old neighbourhood, older than anything humanity had ever put out in space. The very age of it was terrifying to her. She was a creature of a different age, a different sky. Almost blindly, she groped her way along a virtual map interposed before her eyes, the Level Three con-

course spread out, until she found the games-worlds pods.

Dark nooks along a narrow corridor, tens of full-body pods in each, about half occupied. People worked in the games-worlds, people lived and dreamed and made love in them.

A solitary, human, attendant. Young, thin, nervous looking, he wouldn't look at her directly, though Carmel's hair, moving of its own volition, kept creeping up on him. She paid for a night and, exhausted, slid into a pod.

It closed over her, sealing her in silence and in darkness, and she slept.

.....
Polyport, at dusk...

The unveiling ceremony took place against the membrane of the dome, on the designated eastern side, at the end of a maze of narrow streets.

Later, her memory remained hazy –

Stolly standing there, his image, smiling faintly, pale, broadcast across the networks, across Polyphemus Port and the other few Titanic settlements and beyond, into Saturn space and, gradually, across the space hubs, everywhere, to anyone who cared to watch, data moving at the speed of light, so slowly...

Stolly standing there, giving a little speech – something something “my Muse” – that capital letter – Stolly's hands shaking as he moved them through the air, summoning the last of the sub-routines and embedded protocols, bringing to life his creation –

The explosion took off his head, showered blood over the assembled guests.

Screams, intensifying with the second explosion, and a breach in the wall of the dome sucking in poisonous atmosphere, Titan being allowed into the port – the panic, screaming, the sudden network traffic increasing a thousandfold as all over Polyport and near-space people tuned in to watch –

To watch Stolly's last, greatest masterpiece.

Stillness Within A Storm can still be viewed on the east side of Polyport, though special permission must be obtained. Tickets are on sale through the regular channels. The breach in the hull had never been repaired, but somehow Stolichnaya Birú, the artist, had formulated a kind of localised storm in which outdoor and indoor pressure

cancelled each other.

The storm is roughly globular in structure. It seems to contrast and expand periodically, and a security corridor has been established around the site, as well as emergency filters ready to be put into action at the first sign of danger.

But the weather hacker had known what he was doing.

The storm combines both internal atmosphere and the atmosphere of Titan itself, merging them into a complex, always-raging ball of storm, in hues of purple and white, inside which –

The pressures cancel each other, but filaments of gas and dust weave themselves, within that stillness, into something resembling a face. Much had been made of that face, and efforts to interpret it had failed. It is humanoid, possibly feminine. Its eyes are explosions in red. Its mouth opens, white streaks like canines slide out, gradually, and it seems the image grimaces, or grins. It rotates slowly, dissipates, returns. For months on end it remains perfectly still, frozen. Then it disintegrates and is reborn, again and again, a stillness captured in a storm.

The image of the artist's head exploding as the breach first occurred had since become a minor meme in the Conversation. The artist's blood and brain matter itself became incorporated into the installation, helping to form part of the enigmatic face. As for Carmel, she had made her way to the port and took transport on the first available ship, never to be seen on Titan again.

She tore open the pod. Blinked in the sudden glare of electric light. Sat up. Her head ached, her mouth was filled with saliva. The machine had otherwise taken care of her bodily functions, her human waste. She felt ravenous. Strigoi-hungry. Human-hungry. She pulled herself out of the pod. Stood on shaking legs. The gravity pressed down on her. Remembered where she was. Earth. Central Station. In a land they had called Palestine, and Judea, and Jaffa-Tel Aviv.

She stumbled out of the pod-room and found a burger bar and devoured a double helping, red meat, deep-fried potatoes, starch and salt and fats. Strigoi still ate food, their hunger was something else, a craving not of the physical.

It made her think again of Mars, and of the

reason she came here, and a feeling stole over her, suddenly, of a terrible loneliness, like a cosmic wind blowing, cold and forlorn, between the stars.

The space port, this Central Station, felt to her like a womb, or a prison – anyhow, somewhere from which she had to escape. Wiping away ketchup and mustard stains and crumpling the cheap paper napkin into a ball, she stood up, walked, almost running, to the giant elevators, and descended down to street level.

The doors opened. Hot air blew in, fighting the internal air conditioning units. Carmel felt moisture form on her lip, licked it away. She walked through the doors and found herself, at last, outside.

The Mediterranean sun was hot, its light fell in sheets, like glass, it suffused the world, picking objects and people in sharp relief, casting halos, obliterating shade. Carmel blinked, thin cataract-like growths of radiation-filtering transparent material formed over her eyes, shielding them from the sun. She blinked again, sneezed. The reaction took her by surprise and for a moment she hovered, uncertain, before bursting into a sudden, rare, natural laugh.

People stared, but she didn't mind. She crossed the road and it was like being in another world, this old neighbourhood of rundown buildings out there in the open, the space port receding behind her back to insignificance. This is where people lived, it was like Titan, or Mars, or the asteroids, only the dome above her head was higher, and circled an entire world. There was something comforting, she thought, about domes. About barriers. The space port was a violation of that.

She entered an old, pleasant pedestrian street. NE'VE SHA'ANAN, the sign said. It was shaded here by the old buildings rising on both sides of it, shops on the ground level, flats overhead. She passed old men sitting playing backgammon and bao outside, puffing on sweet-smelling water pipes, drinking coffee from small, chipped white china cups. She passed a greengrocer's where watermelons spilled beside oranges and *narafika*, that small, sweet, South Pacific fruit they sometimes called Malay Apple or *Syzygium Ricchi*. She passed a shoe shop and allowed herself a moment to stop, and browse, and try on a pair that par-

ticularly captivated her.

She did not know where she would find him, but she knew she was close. She didn't know what she would say, or how she could explain why she had come, all this way, when she herself hardly knew.

She had met him in Tong Yun.

"Hello!" The voice startled her, coming at her unexpected and loud. She turned, shielding her eyes, and saw the Martian woman, Magdalena, waving from the doorway of a small shop with a sign above it that said, simply, MAMA JONES' SHEBEEN.

Magdalena came up to her, she was a soft filled-in woman, she put out warmth like a warhead or a sun. "You never told me your name," she said, almost accusingly.

"It's Carmel," Carmel said, and the other woman beamed, and said, "What a beautiful name!"

"Thank you," Carmel said, awkwardly. She was uncomfortable next to regular humans. Always feeling they should see her for what she was, what she had become. Always afraid of being discovered. But already Magdalena was pulling her with her, as if she, Carmel, was a space rock, caught in the gravitational force of a planet. Before she knew it she was at the entrance to the shebeen and then inside.

It was cool there and dark, a small sparsely furnished room with a bar counter against the wall, tables and chairs for patrons, a tub filled with water for tentacle-junkies, currently unoccupied. Sheesha pipes, a node broadcasting reruns of the Martian soap *Chains of Assembly*, dusty bottles on shelves on the wall. Magdalena Wu pulled back a chair for Carmel and sat down herself. A third woman came over, from behind the bar, she was small, dark, and she smiled, wiping her hands with a towel.

"Miriam," Magdalena said, "this is Carmel."

"Nice to meet you," the woman said.

Carmel said, "Likewise," liking this small, compact person, without quite knowing why.

"What can I get you?" Miriam said.

"Let's have some lemonade," Magdalena said. "It's a hot day."

"Yes," Miriam agreed. She went around the bar, came back with a glass jug, frosted with ice. Mint leaves floated in the cool green drink inside. Mir-

iam put down three glasses on the table and sat down, joining them.

"What brings you to Earth, Carmel?" she said. "I like your hair."

Carmel's dreads moved slowly in the air above her head, like snakes drugged by the heat. "Thank you. I'm... I hoped to find someone I used to know," Carmel said.

"Here?" Miriam said. "In Central Station? Or..." She smiled. "Most people only pass through here," she said. "Are you?"

"No. I mean, yes. Or, I don't know." Carmel took a sip from her lemonade, feeling exposed. Someone came into the shebeen then, a quiet, tall form, came around them, laid a hand on Miriam's shoulder, a gesture of affection, of closeness, and Miriam squeezed the man's hand, said, "Boris."

At the sound of the name Carmel felt her hand shake and she put down the glass with exaggerated care. She did not look up.

"Hello, Magda," Boris said.

The Martian woman said, "Cousin," warmth in her voice, "I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Car -"

"Carmel," Boris said. Shock in his voice.

Carmel raised her head at last. Her hair moved, agitated, a dark halo surrounding her face. "Boris," she said. He was tall, thin, the Martian aug that was so much a part of him pulsed gently, nestled between his head and shoulder, a parasitic growth on his skin.

"Carmel, what are you doing here?"

She saw them all looking at her. Magdalena, and Miriam, and Boris, a range of emotions, concern, suspicion, mistrust, fear, bemusement, their nodes were broadcasting, Magdalena said, "Boris, you know this girl?" and Boris said, flatly, the words like blades cutting Carmel up, "She is no girl. She is strigoi."

She had met Boris Aaron Chong two months after first arriving at Tong Yun.

Tong Yun City, Mars: the streets dirty and crowded together under the dome, but most of the city was underground, level under level leading at last to the Dark Sea, the Ocean of Refuge - *Solwota blong Dak*, or *Solwota blong Doti*, in the pidgin of the asteroids. Carmel had been living in a hostel of sorts on Level Five, a dark, vast region

of caves and tunnels where rent was cheap and questions were few. But she had gone up to the surface, on Arafat Avenue she had a milkshake in the shade and watched the trams go past and a robotnik, rusted with age, begging for spare parts on the street – robotniks were ubiquitous.

Mars was not as she had expected it to be. She was afraid to leave the city. Beyond Tong Yun and its space elevator the planet was a wild unknown, the Red Soviet and New Israel and the Chinese tunnel networks and the isolated homesteads and kibbutzim small places, where a strigoi would be all too easy to detect. She remained in the city, hiding in the crowd, feeding flittingly, at risk, though down in the lower levels people disappeared, and she was not the only hunter stalking the shadows...

She just wasn't very *good* at it, she thought. She had often wished that nameless Shambleau on board the *Emaciated Messiah* had picked someone – anyone – else. She, Carmel, had just wanted to leave home. She wanted to see what the rest of the worlds looked like. Instead she became sick before she ever got off the ship. And it was a sickness without a cure, an affliction the only way out of was death.

There was a man sitting at a nearby table, sipping coconut juice, and she felt her eyes drawn to him, more and more, as she sat there. He was alone. He was a tall, pale man and wore an aug, a thing bred out of microscopic Martian genetic material, an alien thing, pulsing gently on his neck like a parasite. She could not look away. He turned, then, and saw her looking, and smiled, a small, private smile that made her like him. He did not come over. Neither did she. But when he paid and left she did the same, and she followed him that day through the streets of Tong Yun, down Arafat Avenue and Ho Chi Minh and Mandela and down the smaller streets where forgotten rulers and leaders out of dusty history intermingled uneasily. The man she was following lived in a co-op building, common to Tong Yun, where housing came at a premium. She had watched him go in and followed, the building's meagre security no match for her cancerous internal network. She followed him up to the fourth floor of the building and entered his room after him, picking the lock.

He had turned. She remembered it vividly. He had turned, that look of quiet surprise on his face. He said nothing. Took her in, and there was pity in his eyes, somehow that was the worst thing about it. Her hair was cut short then, she did not have the dreads. He said, "Shambleau..." softly. She approached him. He did not back away. Her mind, her node, her senses went for him. The hunger welling inside her, so severely she imagined filaments pushing out of her skin like worms, wriggling in their eagerness to feed. He did not resist her. She sank her teeth into his neck, ready to feed, and –

Something rotten but not unpleasant, something dark without having shape. She could not understand it. She could not break into his mind, it was a locked prison surrounded by alien matter, no dopamine response, no wash of precious data over her, it was like biting cardboard rather than a man.

Almost gently, he pushed her away. Held her arms. She stared into his eyes, confused, shaking with the hunger. The Martian aug was pulsating on his neck. "I already have one parasite," he said – almost, it seemed, apologetic.

"You know her," Miriam said. Boris wouldn't meet her eyes. Carmel looked from one to the other, afraid, angry. Miriam said, "You never told me..." There was wounded hurt in her voice.

"I have a past," Boris said. Almost angry, Carmel thought. "We all do."

"But your past followed you here," Miriam said. Then, looking at Carmel, "Look at the poor girl. She's shaking!"

"Shambleau?" Magdalena Wu looked at Carmel, looked at Boris, her cousin. "How could you – ?" And seeing Miriam approach Carmel said, "No! Don't go near her, she could –"

"It's a sickness, Magda," Boris said. His voice was flat. "It's not her fault."

"No," Magdalena said, "no..."

She shook her head, pushed back the chair; it came crashing down on the floor with a bang.

"I can't. You must –"

"Then go," Miriam said. "But don't –" A look passed between them. Carmel could not decipher it. Then Magdalena was gone.

"She was nice to me," Carmel said.

Miriam put her hand on Carmel's brow. It felt warm there, comforting. Miriam's node was wide open, Carmel could have devoured her in an instant. "How could you?" Miriam said, angry. "She is only a girl!"

They had gone to bed together, that first night. It felt so strange, to be this close, this physical, with someone, and yet be unable to get into their mind, to share who, what, they were. In that tiny apartment in Tong Yun, on Boris' narrow bed, they made love.

She had to learn him from the outside, to piece together clues, hints, things he told her, things he didn't. She could not read him, the aug was always between them. He was a doctor, he told her. He worked in the birthing clinics, he specialised in Progeny Design. He was from Earth, originally. From that region called the Middle East (but east of what?), a place called Central Station. He was as exotic to her as she must have seemed to him, she studied him the old-fashioned way, with fingers, tongue, with taste and smell. They explored each other, fashioning maps. But he could not ease her hunger.

He sat opposite her. His fingers on her jaw line, lifting up her head, gently. "What am I going to do with you, Carmel?" he said. He sounded exasperated. She watched him silently, watched Miriam, that small compact woman, owner of this shebeen, could almost see, visually, the lines of affection and shared history that bound her and Boris together. Felt jealous. "Why did you *come* here?"

Wonder in his voice.

"Leave her be." Miriam, like a mother, fussing over her. Made Carmel want to hiss, like a comical strigoi, like something out of that classic Phobos Studios production, *Shambleau*, where Elvis Mandela played the fearless strigoi hunter who ends up falling for the parasite he catches. There had been several sequels, and knock-offs and copies, but the films always ended the same way.

The strigoi had to die.

"Why?" the Shambleau says. This is the penultimate scene of the film. An unlikely set of circumstances sees Elvis Mandela first stalk and

then capture the Shambleau, become addicted, flee from a group of silent assassins (headed by Shirkan Goodbye, who always played the villain in the Phobos Studios productions), find shelter in a Church of Robot node, escape again, run into a group of Martian Re-Born and finally ubiqued into the virtuality of ancient Mars-That-Never-Was, where the scene is set.

Mars-That-Never-Was. An ancient land of canals and steamy jungles, ruled over by the Emperor of Time; a construct of the Re-Born faith, facilitated by Others, a sophisticated digital universe, some said; a reality of which our own is but a shadow, the Re-Born said. In that penultimate scene, on the Grand Canal, Elvis Mandela holds the Shambleau in his arms as they watch the dying sun. "Why?" the Shambleau says.

Elvis Mandela draws the katana blade from its sheath. He strokes the Shambleau's head, the protruding nodal filaments of her hair. "Because I have to," he says.

Their affair was doomed, Carmel knew. She knew Boris was fascinated by her. Aroused by her difference. And his aug somehow protected him, it was an alien buffer her own cancerous nodal growths could not penetrate. Boris wanted to help her. To remake her. To *study* her. All the while knowing his own weakness, admitting to his sexual infatuation with her, this human kink that made them lust for strigoi, for the thing that could harm them.

It did not last long. Three, four months, always in his apartment, Carmel afraid of going out, Boris making love to her and drawing her blood and running diagnostics, until even he had to admit the wrong of what he was doing, this playing of doctor and patient, unethical, corrupting, wrong.

He never gave her up. Never betrayed her. But she left him, because she had to, because it was wrong, and because she was hungry.

She returned to Level Five and to hunting in the tunnels. Sometimes she even met other strigoi, but something in them mutually repelled each other, some glitch or built-in effect that ensured they did not hunt together, that they would remain alone.

What prompted her to go to Earth? To under-

take another space voyage, on board a ship where she might be discovered, past the network verification systems of old Earth, and to that strange land Boris had once come from? She knew he had gone home. She kept track of him, on and off, through the Conversation. Knew he had left Tong Yun, later heard he had gone back to Earth.

But what was home? For her, that asteroid she came from? The longhouse, the multitude of relatives, the lone mine-ships and watching endless reruns of *Chains of Assembly*?

"Perhaps I just wanted to see Earth," she said. "I don't know anyone else on this planet."

"How did you even get *through*?" he said. "The immigration systems should have picked you up, arrested you!"

"I bought an ident tag, a whole new being," she said. "From a Conch called Shemesh, back in Tong Yun."

Boris stood up. Paced. Miriam sat opposite Carmel. Looked at her. "So you're...Shambleau?" she said. "I have never met..."

"We don't belong here," Carmel said. Squirmed. Miriam made her feel both welcome and uncomfortable. "We're creatures of the spaceways." A line from that Elvis Mandela picture. Even to her ears it sounded ridiculous.

"She can't stay here," Boris said. The aug pulsed on his neck. At that moment, Carmel hated him. It. *Them*. There was no man without the Martian growth. They were one, a single being, joined.

Miriam said nothing. Just looked at Boris. And he turned back. No words between them. No data transfer, either. Just a look, speaking more than an encrypted message ever could.

"She's dangerous," Boris said. Already defeated.

"There are other ways of knowing," Miriam said. "This is Manhome, they say, but they are wrong. This is Womanhome, the womb of humanity, and there are older, stranger powers here, Boris."

"Like what?" he said. Bitter, suddenly. "God? Always your God!"

"You need to have faith," Miriam said. But gently. "It is hard enough just being alive. You have to have a little faith."

Boris shook his head. But Miriam had already dismissed him. She turned to Carmel, a wordless question in her eyes.

Would you like to stay?

Carmel didn't know what to say.

The poet Bashō, who, it was rumoured, had met and fallen in love with a Shambleau near an Ogko shrine below Mons Olympus, had never told the tale of that affair. Did it end as it does in the film franchise from Phobos Studios? Or had it ended differently, with mutual love, with a recognition that a strigoi is no more predator than man is? Had Bashō fled, or was he propelled onwards, a restless spirit on a quest that had no goal beyond the road itself?

We do not, cannot, know. But this is Womanhome, Earth Prime, and there are other ways of knowing and of seeing that we do not yet comprehend. As for Bashō, our only clue is one final poem he had written, though never published. It runs like this:

Sambelu.

Taem yu save lafem hem, hemi kilim yu. Sambelu. Awo! Sambelu,

Sambelu blong mi. Mi lafem yu. Mi lukluk yu. Yu kilim mi,

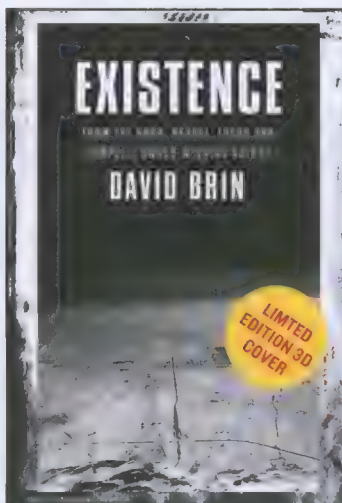
Mi kilim yu. Yu lafem mi, mi lafem yu. Sambelu. Sambelu.

Sambelu.

And translates, roughly, so: "Shambleau. / When you love her, she hurts you. Shambleau. Oh! Shambleau, / my Shambleau. I love you, I look at you. You hurt me / I hurt you. You love me, and I love you. Shambleau. Shambleau. / Shambleau."

"Yes," Carmel said.

'Strigoi' is a new story set in Lavie's Central Station milieu (we published the first of his Central Station stories, 'The Indignity of Rain,' in issue #240). Other Central Station stories have so far appeared in *Clarkesworld*, anthology *Robots: The Recent A.I.*, and in Gardner Dozois' *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Twenty-Ninth Annual Collection*. Lavie's novel *Osama* is currently nominated for a World Fantasy Award, and will be released in paperback in October. Visit Lavie's website at lavietidhar.wordpress.com for more information, and also an amazing book trailer made by the Hungarian publishers of *Osama*.

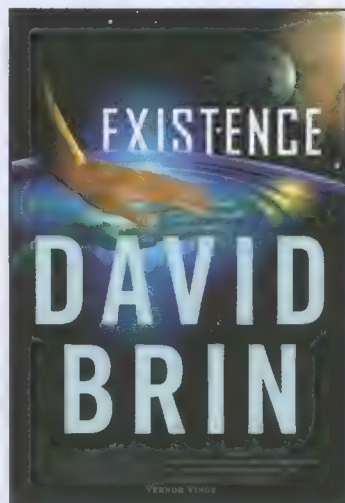
**BOOK
ZONE****EXISTENCE**
DAVID BRIN INTERVIEWED**CURSED****2312****GREAT NORTH ROAD****THE DEVIL'S NEBULA****THE GIRL WHO FELL
BENEATH FAIRYLAND AND
LED THE REVELS THERE****NESTED SCROLLS****RAILSEA****THE KILLING MOON****THE SHADOWED SUN****THE LAST MAN STANDING****WONDERS OF THE
INVISIBLE WORLD****THE MOON MOTH****ADRIFT ON THE SEA
OF RAINS****SEVEN WONDERS****BLUEGRASS SYMPHONY****BREAD AND CIRCUSES****EXISTENCE****David Brin**

Orbit, 550pp, £13.99 tpb

Tor, 560pp, \$27.99 hb

Science fiction might well be defined as fiction that would be incomprehensible if sent fifty years into the past. The dilemma that faces the writer of near-future fiction is that it is bound to end up mistaken in so many aspects. The best you can do is convince the present-day readership and hope that you get enough right to keep people reading in the future. In other words, you can try to build a classic SF novel. Research, therefore, is vital. *Existence* is extremely well researched and at times can even seem overstuffed; however, better than a hollow adventure. There is plenty to chew on here.

The opening chapters take place around forty years from today and are very busy and noisy. Lassitude grips the rich while the poor inhabit a climate-changed dystopia; but the extremely poor have always looked dystopian to us. Humanity is probably heading for extinction in a big whimper at some stage unless something sudden and really nasty happens first. Manned spaceflight has degenerated into



tourist joyrides, mostly. There is a program to sweep trash from near-Earth orbit, but it is a long way from the thrill of exploration. It is hinted (certainly by the oligarchs) that the age of democracy could be over. If growth is stopped, a stagnant form of survival may be achievable, at least for a while. Hamish Brookeman, the mid-century's multimedia equivalent of a science fiction author, is our window on the secret meetings of the oligarchs although, of course, he is not party to the meetings of the inner circle. They are not an inherently evil group, merely very, very selfish.

Meanwhile a space station hooks something that is not trash but is, in fact, an artefact containing the uploaded personalities of many aliens from different species. The beings in the artefact claim that humanity is doomed and their only hope for any sort of survival is to make copies of it and upload their personalities. While this does explain the Fermi Paradox (the lack of evidence of other civilisations) there are arguments as to whether this is a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, as soon as the football-sized artefact's existence is made public, thousands of other artefacts (on and off Earth) start

REVIEW AND INTERVIEW BY JIM STEEL

DAVID BRIN

David Brin is a scientist, technical consultant and award-winning author of over a dozen novels including the Uplift series and *The Postman* which was adapted into a Hollywood blockbuster

to make their presence know. Brin avoids mentioning Von Neumann machines until later in the novel but they are clearly variations on the theme. Many of the other artefacts disagree with the first one. And there have been wars in the past. Humanity could be facing the greatest danger of all and inaction may be as fatal as action.

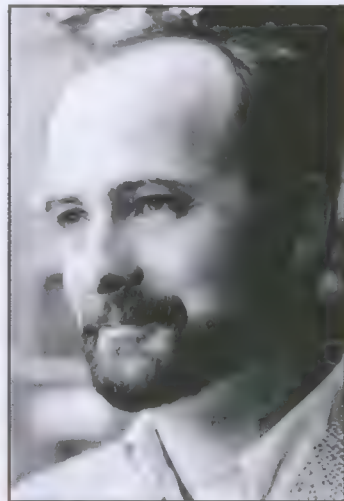
Brin moves his large cast of characters (human, alien and machine; living and uploaded) across the following decades during which he gives us a very convincing answer to the Fermi Paradox. Indeed, it is hard to think of a better solution. He also addresses many of the other dangers that we face and, despite his essential optimism, it makes for alarming reading.

And does his future setting convince? Standing here today it looks inevitable.

How does *Existence* connect with your Uplift Universe? The universe of *Existence* may be a different one, but it also shows us the origins of Uplifting.

I'm not the first to portray humans meddling to increase animal intellect. Cordwainer Smith, Pierre Boulle, H.G. Wells all depicted it as an act of arrogant hubris, in which we'd make the simplistic mistake – the wretched moral failing – by forcing the new people into slavery. I respect that warning-theme...but it's been done. So instead I chose to explore what the consequences might be if we did it with compassion, openness and care. If we took on such a project with the very best intentions. Wouldn't there still be problems? Awkward transitions? Misunderstandings and pain?

Folks write to me wishing we'd proceed. Hurry and add those dolphin and simian fellow citizens that I portray in *Startide Rising* or the *Uplift War*. These enthusiasts are looking at the end product, a civilization of our many-times grandchildren that's made wiser by a new diversity of viewpoints. Terrific. But the pain that's inherent in such a journey... I want to discuss that, as well. So I included the origins of dolphin uplift in my broad tapestry of life in the year 2050, in *Existence*.



I'm sure some will try to start such projects. And they'll be strenuously opposed by people on both the right and the left. It will take a lot of guts, money and determination to start down that road.

Do you foresee all of the world's space agencies going into stasis or is this merely for the convenience of the plot?

Where did I ever say that? Which book did you read?

In *Existence*, characters look back upon a rich history of starts and stops in human space exploration – just as we do. The Cheng He mission (named after the great Chinese explorer admiral) set forth in 2030 for Mars...but ended badly. Inevitably, after such disasters, there are doldrums, times of reassessment when cynics gain the upper hand. Do you remember *Challenger*? *Columbia*? How am I being anything other than realistic?

And yet, I portray us crossing the doldrums, regaining confidence. Over the long run, that's what matters.

Many of the sections – such as *Pandora's Cornucopia* – could easily stand on their own as nonfiction. You have already published much nonfiction, so was

there a temptation to do this?

Salon Magazine ran a series of excerpts from Pandora's Cornucopia – a fictitious tome about all the possible ways the world might end. I've even received contract offers to write the real book! But no, I only cite from it. Someone else will have to create the full-length version!

This method – citing fictitious news accounts, books and arguments between the chapters – got its start with the novel *USA* by John Dos Passos and was brought to stunning fruition by the titan of 1960s science fiction, John Brunner, in his fantastic *Stand on Zanzibar*.



bar, a work that deeply inspired my novel *Earth* and now *Existence*.

Indeed, there are minor characters and even a disease in *Existence* that are named after people and events in Brunner's master work. One of the reviews that most pleased me made flattering comparisons between the two novels.

You cite Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. Were his findings a surprise or a confirmation of what you already knew or suspected?

As Richard Feynman said, we are the animal who is spectacularly

talented at delusion. It can be our glory – as when we create art or steep ourselves in some great work, or even temporarily depart the confines of our flesh to walk in some fictional characters' shoes.

But delusion is also the great human malediction! For 6000 years feudal leaders convinced themselves they were wise enough to rule without restraint and to dispense with criticism (the only known antidote to error) which explains the horrific statecraft of every kingdom, till the Enlightenment.

Today, we see cult-like delusions

at all ends of the so-called (and utterly delusional) "left-right political axis", a despicably lobotomizing and oversimplifying metaphor. The right seems incapable of accepting a palpable truth that is inherent in science fiction – that children can sometimes learn from the mistakes of their parents and become better people than their parents, and that society can improve...as it blatantly *has* improved in countless ways. Those who deny it simply know no history.

The left is almost as crazy. They admit and avow that people and generations and societies *can*

improve. But they obstinately refuse ever to admit that *we have* improved, remarkably, even spectacularly, in so many ways, e.g. having driven ancient addictive habits like racism, sexism and environmental neglect into ill repute. (They still exist! But ill repute is a great start.)

Likewise, the steady decline in violence, every decade since World War II, is stunning in its inarguable scale and transformative power, till today 90% of human beings have never seen smoke rise from a burning city or heard the concussion of an invading army's feet, or cringed under the blows of a feudal overlord. And most women have at least some recourse against abusive marriages. And now the vast majority of children go to school.

What Pinker has done is lay it down so clearly that we have a potent weapon against the enemies of progress. Cynics who proclaim we cannot journey down such a road...and those who dismally cry out that we haven't begun.

We've begun. There's a long way to go, but we're halfway to *Star Trek*. And the cynics aren't even slightly helpful.

"I believe our only path is forward. But we need to proceed with earnest care"

How much danger do you think we face from a resurgence of oligarchies? Could we really be at the high-water mark of democracy? Every generation of the Enlightenment has faced what we now face...attempted putsches by those with a taste of influence and power, who try to augment that power into overlord status.

What could be more tediously predictable? Look across 6000 years of agricultural societies, 99% of which fell into the same dismal pattern. The same pyramid of power, with a few lordling it over masses, who passed their lowly

status automatically to their kids. Heck, this is the natural outcome biological advantage! We are all descended from the harems of guys who pulled off that trick! I'd be very surprised if we did not see this predictable assault on the Enlightenment Experiment...the only alternative to feudal hell.

Still, whether or not it is "natural", we have to fight it. And are we made of lesser stuff than our parents, and their parents, who kept the Enlightenment Experiment alive, despite all the contrary tugs of human nature?

In saying that, I'm no leftist! In fact, do you know who most denounced oligarchic cheating as fundamentally stupid, unproductive and flawed? Adam freaking Smith. He called for the level playing field. Maximizing the number of skilled, confident, creative competitors by ending every class preference and educating and feeding every single child... Today's liberals remember the second half of that prescription but not the first. Alas.

In *Existence* I portray a world in which we managed to stop the oligarchic putsch of 2013...only to face a new, more sophisticated one, in 2050. The aim of the novel is not political! But some of the characters chew this matter over – from all sides – including some riffs that give the perspective of aristocracy in all this. Their best arguments for why the Enlightenment may have been a big mistake.

Hamish Brookeman is a character who is a science fiction author. (There's also a heroic character called Tor, I note.) I have a feeling that making him yet another killer 'B' is merely camouflage. Who's he really based on? (He reminded me of Michael Crichton.)

There's a bit of Crichton in Hamish, I admit. And parts of myself that I both like and dislike. And a couple of other living authors who shall remain nameless (in part because

I wonder if they'll catch on!). He's a complex character, smart enough to make a good case for some beliefs that I definitely do not share! And yet, he goes on a journey of discovery, and finds an ore of his own wisdom to mine.

I might add that this character was named after a fan who won naming rights after he generously contributed to a charity drive. This "tuckerized" character became more important than I ever expected!

I feel that, although the universe is probably awash with life, technological species arise only rarely. This, however, would make for a dull novel. Your solution to the Fermi Paradox is both elegant and chillingly plausible. Where do you stand on it?

I've been exploring 'The Great Silence' as both an astronomer and a fiction author almost all my life. My paper surveying explanations for the Fermi Paradox – in the Royal Astronomical Society's Journal (1983) – is still the only review article in the (SETI) field, because all the smart people, from Hawking to Kaku to Davies, seem compelled to pick just one Fermi explanation and declare "this is it!"

How can anybody do that? On what basis? Extraterrestrial Intelligence is the only fascinating scientific topic without any known subject matter! Far better to catalogue the possibilities, rank them in some kind of order of plausibility, and look for the gaps we may have missed. Anyway, that's one of the fun threads running through *Existence*.

You produced an amazing preview trailer (tinyurl.com/exist-trailer) for *Existence* in partnership with web-artist Patrick Farley. Is this part of a trend toward multimedia expansion of the novel?

It was great working with Patrick on what turned out to be a truly

stunning work of art in its own right. We're seeing trailers used as book marketing tools, or course. But the thing that fascinates me is where this may lead. Neal Stephenson's Hieroglyph Project, for example, tries to pioneer new multimedia extrapolations from the novel's text.

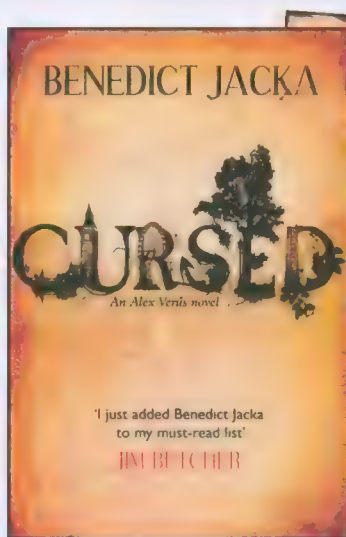
I also expect 'animated storyboards' to become an entirely new art form...90 minute movie length, with music and dialogues, but simple avatar visuals, it will be writer and story-centred, sidling past and around the wretched cowardice that Hollywood has become.

Much of *Existence* is built around the problems that we are facing in this century even without alien intervention. Where do you see us in forty – or a hundred – years?

I deal a lot with believers in a coming "singularity", who think we're all going to transform into gods during the next human generation. I find them attractive and fun folks, who do believe in human improvability and progress! Nevertheless, I also deem them to be just as crazy as the cynics and the left and right. It's a dangerous path they have mapped out for us, fraught with the potential for terrible mistakes...

Mistakes of the sort that may have stymied every other "intelligent" race to climb up before us, in this starkly silent galaxy. I believe our only path is forward. But we need to proceed with earnest care. Eagerness! But also a relentless readiness to discover and eliminate errors. That can only come about through the greatest enlightenment process. Criticism – reciprocal, vigorous.

Take it. Dish it out. Keep it open. If we keep poking in the path in front of us, probing for mistakes *before* we make them, then perhaps the first of the great, star-travelling civilizations will be descended from gregarious African apes. ■



CURSED

Benedict Jacka

Orbit pb, 336pp, £7.99

Juliet E. McKenna

Jacka's debut novel *Fated* attracted favourable reviews as well as encouraging word of mouth buzz, and deservedly so. *Cursed* is the second in this series set in a contemporary London that nevertheless has a hidden, magical and unquestionably dangerous parallel city lurking behind deserted buildings and down blind alleys.

The Alex Verus series milieu is both agreeably familiar and assuredly distinctive. Alex is a mage and he runs an 'arcana emporium' because a 'magic shop' gets too many customers wanting to buy card tricks. Despite this, he tries to steer clear of other wizards and especially shuns the politics and rivalries between the factions of Light and Dark. This is easier than it might otherwise be, because he is a Diviner. Other wizards have other powers, all with their particular strengths and costs. Mages are generally intent on enhancing those strengths and seeing someone else bear the costs if that's at all possible.

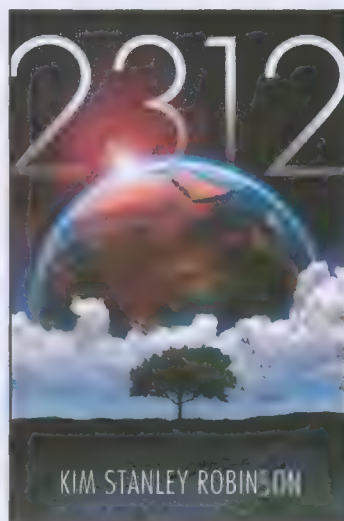
Satisfyingly, divination is no



'get-out-of-strife-free' ability. *Cursed* opens as Alex assesses the problems which his recent successes have brought him. He knows better than to automatically equate Light with good and has learned that Dark doesn't necessarily mean evil. However, he can't count on the support of either faction. At the moment he's looking to be just useful enough to more powerful mages to ensure that they'll be very annoyed with any of his enemies who deprive them of his services. Even if that does mean helping a gun-toting henchmen track a magical monster through a derelict warehouse.

Though Alex is by no means friendless. He frequently visits a ten-foot-tall spider, Arachne, who lives beneath Hampstead Heath. She's naturally his first call as he searches for information about monsters. Arachne's more interested in discussing Luna, who may or may not be Alex's apprentice. Luna's own magic is complicated by a curse which makes her very bad luck indeed to be around. Alex's feelings are complicated by his own attraction to Luna and by her involvement with Martin who's ready to risk using a perilous magical artefact to avoid her curse.

As Alex picks his way through the story's steadily unfolding events, Jacka strikes an effective balance between satisfying expectations and keeping the audience guessing with well-crafted misdirection. Crucially, Jacka always plays fair. Such honesty also grounds the emotional facets of the story, exploring loyalty and betrayal, friendship, love and lust. Alex's insights into his own feelings prove as decisive in the story's final dramatic outcome as his understanding of the machinations of enemies and allies alike and the prices he is willing to pay.



2312

Kim Stanley Robinson

Orbit hb, 561pp, £18.99

Jack Deighton

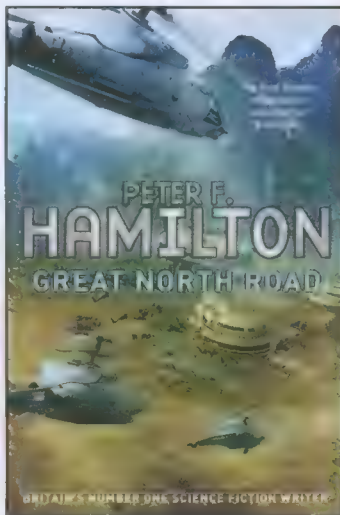
The solar system has long been colonised, from asteroids inside the orbit of Mercury out to the mining of the Oort cloud. Earth is garlanded with space elevators and its billions of mainly impoverished inhabitants are resentful of the easier life they imagine spacers enjoy. The planet has succumbed to global warming. Terraformed asteroids – either hollowed out and spun up "innies" or tented over "outies" – provide habitats for the growth of food, the preservation of animals now extinct on the home planet, or as spaceships for fast inter-system travel. Politically the structure is Balkanised with habitats jealously guarding their own interests. Humanity too is splintering as a result of the different living environments that abound. Medical advances mean limbs can be regrown, life span has increased, gender become more plastic. Quantum computer AIs known as qubes control many processes, some are utilised as wrist aids or even via head implants. *2312* has no lack, then, of science-fictional

ideas with which to tickle the sense of wonder. The characters' longevity is almost incidental, though, as they act as if they're in their twenties or younger. This may be how long life spans affect us, of course.

The narrative follows four viewpoint characters: Swan Er Hong, a gynandromorph who lives on Mercury and whose grandmother's death leads off the story; police Inspector Jean Genette, a so-called small; Fitz Wahram, an androgyn; and Kiran, a young Earthman who rescues Swan from possible kidnapping on one of her visits to Earth. The plot hinges on whether or not the qubes are developing consciousness and designs of their own, even manifesting themselves as androids, possibly as terrorists. We see the characters caught up in events, variously imperilled, but never quite at the centre of things.

Since his Mars trilogy Robinson has rarely borne his research lightly. Here the chapters are variously separated by descriptions of eight (sub)planetary bodies/habitats, fifteen lists, eighteen extracts from an apparent history written well after the events of the novel and three "quantum walks". It is a style which largely circumvents the crudities of information dumping by parading them as a strength. It is not an entirely new approach to the problem. Robinson credits John Dos Passos in his acknowledgements, and, within SF, John Brunner employed a similar technique in *Stand on Zanzibar*.

The main fault with all this is that it can seem the narrative has been designed to show off the research. Without the interpolations between the chapters, though, the book would have been much less impressive. In 2312 plot and characterisation are not Robinson's primary concern. It is the solar system – to which, as one of the interludes reminds us, humanity is bound by the vastness of interstellar space – that is his hero.



GREAT NORTH ROAD

Peter F. Hamilton

Macmillan hb, 1104pp, £20.00

John Howard

Great North Road is another massive novel from Peter F. Hamilton, not quite as long as the *Great North Road* itself, but passing through many more places, both on this and other worlds. As usual with a Hamilton novel there is no sense of bulk or bloat about it (except its weight and size). *Great North Road* is fast-paced, with whole chapters zipping along the mental motorway with no narrative gyrotory systems to get in the way and foul up the journey. Each chapter covers the events of a single day, starting in January 2143 and tying up most loose ends by the following May. And they are certainly dramatic.

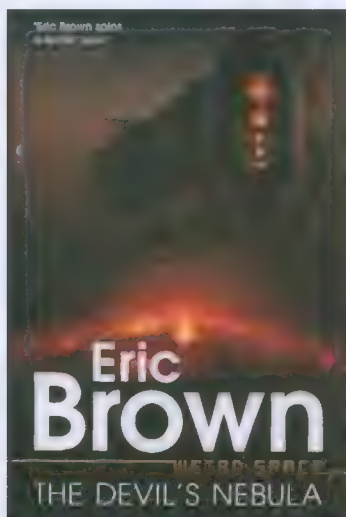
The title is there for a punning reason. Not only is much of the story set in Newcastle, but the fabulously wealthy North family have made the city their base of operations for the Earthside end of their bioil business, using a trans-spacial connection to St Libra, a vast planet orbiting Sirius, to pump the fuel manufactured from its mysterious plant life through to the power-greenery Grande Europe.

The Norths also have another claim to fame (or notoriety): they are all clones of Kane North, who in 2004 began to spend the family trust fund on genetic research.

On a freezing night in Newcastle a member of the North family is found dead, killed in a particularly gruesome manner identical to the way Bartram North and all but one of his household had been murdered on St Libra. The only problem is that the convicted murderer was still languishing in jail.

As the investigation gets underway Hamilton gradually lets us get our bearings through glimpses and longer immersions. The action weaves between Earth and St Libra, steadily tightening the weave and letting the design become more and more apparent. The extensive Hamiltonian cast ranges from those we get to know in some depth to the frequently expendable 'extras'. Bad things happen to the big names too; Hamilton isn't afraid of that. The novel shifts gear as St Libra develops into what amounts to a character in its own right. The members of the expedition sent there to find the alien killer have to reconsider the received wisdom concerning the planet and are dangerously caught up in things beyond their control and bigger than they can at first imagine. It's a long and strenuous trip but worth it.

Great North Road may to some extent seem to mark time until the author's next trilogy comes along. Well, that's OK. For now we have a highly enjoyable and engaging novel with some intriguing ideas and lively characters. We get large slices of several well-realised and lived-in settings dripping with colourful detail and incident like exotic toppings piled onto the pizza that is still such a firm favourite in the middle of the next century. Peter F. Hamilton so clearly enjoyed writing *Great North Road* and rejoices in his sprawling creation – and we end up doing so too.



THE DEVIL'S NEBULA

Eric Brown

Abaddon Books pb, 269pp, £7.99

Ian Hunter

How many horror stories have had the protagonists going to that house, those woods, whatever? It's an overused trope. So in science fiction when I hear the words 'ship', 'planet', and 'distress signal', alarm bells start to ring in my head, but genre stalwart Eric Brown turns that trope on its head with the first book of his shared-world series *Weird Space* because the outlaw crew of *The Paradoxical Poet* really have no choice.

It's been a hard life for captain Ed Carew and his crew as they try and keep one step ahead of the Expansion. No sooner have they entered forbidden Vetch space to retrieve an artefact than they encounter one of the Vetch face-to-face, and given that these aliens resemble shaved, albino dogs with mashed-up faces, that's not a face you want to look at. Nor do they want to escape and run slap bang into the Expansion, to be tried and sentenced to death, unless they agree to go on a mission to the Devil's Nebula to rescue some cultists who fled from the clutches

of the Expansion a hundred years earlier and have been sending out a distress signal. When the only other choice is a shot between the eyes, you really have no choice.

Sounds fairly familiar, I suppose; renegade outsiders, evil empire, big bad alien race, but sprinkled with some nice character development and tantalising glimpses of Brown's new universe – and yes, this book could have been longer, with more made out of the characters. Also more could have been made out of the tantalising glimpses of the technology that underpins this world. In places I thought this read more like the bible for the series, giving the scantest of information for future writers to fill in the blanks, though Brown neatly foreshadows a greater mystery and a greater menace.

After setting up the basic premise he changes the viewpoint to a young girl called Maatja who lives with her parents on the "World" and who survive by eating some disgusting gloop that comes from the body of an alien, one of the Weird. When the gloop hardens they cut it up and eat it some more, not really noticing that all is not what it seems. Maatja does, because her big surprise for going down to the woods one day was to meet an Outsider who told her what's what and now she eats enough berries to sick up the gloop, then eats more berries to stay alive. These early sections involving Maatja I found to be the most engaging, if not the most disturbing. Creepy, eerie, chilling, truly the stuff of 'you don't want to go there', and you know these two worlds are inevitably going to collide.

The Devil's Nebula does what Abaddon hoped, giving the reader an exciting introduction to a strange new world. Next up is *Satan's Reach*, and on the strength of this I'm looking forward to buckling up and hanging on to my chair.



THE GIRL WHO FELL BENEATH FAIRYLAND AND LED THE REVELS THERE

Catherynne M. Valente

Feiwei and Friends hb, 272pp, \$16.99

Stephen Theaker

The sequel to *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*, TGWFBFALTRT demonstrates once again Catherynne M. Valente's deep understanding of the fairy tale, as well as her handy way with a title. In the first book, September was whisked away from her pleasant but humdrum home by the Green Wind and the Leopard of Little Breezes and taken to Fairyland, which was at that time under the thumb of the Marquess, a little girl who loved to press her pretty thumb down. With the help of A-Through-I (a wyverary, the result of a love affair between a wyvern and a library), Saturday (a shy Marid boy) and Gleam (a living lamp), she met all the challenges Fairyland could throw at her with bravery, loyalty and intelligence. But her adventure over, she "winked out, like someone blowing out a candle", and was back in Nebraska, with a promise that she would be allowed to return the next spring.

As "autumn dealt its days like a pack of golden cards, and no one came", she began to wonder if she'd been forgotten. She needn't have worried: in May she spots two queer folk rowing through the wheat fields, and chasing them lands her in a forest of glass with a talking reindeer-girl. But September returns to a land blighted. Everyone has lost their shadows, and magic is being rationed in Fairyland, while the shadows celebrate their new-found freedom in Fairyland-Below. The existing inhabitants of that land are totally, utterly happy with this arrangement – because if they weren't, their new shadow queen Halloween would send the Alleyman to saw off their shadows. And so September has a new quest, but instead of her beloved friends she must travel with their wild, unfettered shadows, never knowing how far she can trust them.

The novel is aimed at children aged ten to fourteen, and many in that age group will adore the elegant style, the postmodern quirks of the narrator, and the torrent of ideas, such as a night-dodo who practises quiet magic, goblin markets that pounce upon travelers and the E.K.T. (Everybody Knows That) field that surrounds Quest Objects. Children interested in writing and storytelling will find the book's Pompidou display of structure revelatory. Younger children used to devouring formulaic books may feel it is, in comparison, rather wordy and slow, but those who persist will be rewarded.

This is a book with emotional heft. September spent much of the first book regretting that she hadn't told mum where she was going; this one sees her confronting the side of herself that could do such a thing. The villain of the first book was motivated by a father's fists, this time it's the fear of a father's death. That weight will see it sink deeply into the memories of its readers, whatever their age.



NESTED SCROLLS

Rudy Rucker

Tor hb, \$25.99

Nathaniel Tapley

Nested Scrolls is difficult to like, whilst at the same time being impossible to hate. Having read it, I was left ambivalent, but also feeling that that probably reflected more poorly on me than it did on the book.

It's Rudy Rucker's autobiography, and is infuriating and delightful in equal measure. The first 100 pages tell the story of his childhood, and this section is the least successful. It's full of childhood reminiscences that seem to have been selected without any concern for their being insightful or extraordinary. It is, quite simply, a list of things Rudy Rucker remembers about being young. However, his naïve style and desire to give you all of the facts comes into its own once things start to happen to him. What, in the early stages of the book, is stultifying and irritating becomes open, honest and wide-ranging as he begins his adult life, and the fragments start to coalesce into a whole.

As Rucker's philosophy begins to emerge, and as he develops the ideas that will play into his fiction,

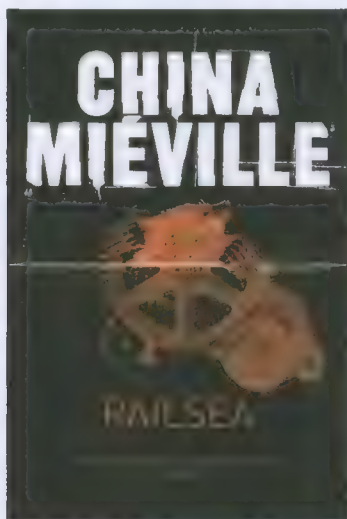
the book suddenly becomes a fascinating insight into a unique mind. Incidents are still dropped in without any sense that they have been curated to serve a greater narrative or thematic purpose, but watching a young academic and writer find his way through the world is much more interesting than the unfiltered flotsam of a childhood.

The book is peppered with mathematical and philosophical insights, and they play heavier in the text as they become more important in Rucker's life, and this, for me, is where the book takes flight. We follow a mercurial mind as it flits from thought to thought, showing them in the context of how they related to a young man in search of meaning.

Rucker says, "Stylistically, I've always tended towards the lively and specific." This is where I began to suspect that the problems I had with the book were my own problems, rather than the author's. I found the early section of the book *too* specific. I didn't see why I should care about any of the minor incidents in Rucker's childhood. Again, that might be because I'm a terrible, empty human being.

Rucker is an entertaining and warm authorial presence. His idiosyncrasies light up the last two-thirds of the book, and make them an entertaining romp through the politics and practicalities of writing science fiction through the 1970s, '80s and '90s. You're never far from a mind-expanding, probably-unexplained theorem ("In particular, there are more points in continuous space than there are integers") or a telling detail.

As soon as Rucker begins to deal with ideas, and begins dealing with the time in his life when he began dealing with ideas, *Nested Scrolls* is a joy. It's funny, intriguing and idiosyncratic. Unfortunately, the flaws of the opening section make it a slog to get to the good stuff. But it's worth it if you persevere.



RAILSEA

China Miéville

Macmillan hb, 384pp, £17.99

Andy Hedgecock

I first encountered China Miéville as a critic. His piece 'Fifty Fantasy and Science Fiction Works that Socialists Should Read' (2003) was a firework display of wit, erudition, entertainment and scholarship lightly worn. This punchy, polemical list took me into new territories and provoked return journeys to half-forgotten old favourites.

There has always been an inextricable link between Miéville's storytelling and his cultural commentary. He isn't a didactic writer – far from it. But his novels are informed by the morality, concerns and democratic model of reading and writing that emerges through his criticism. His recent keynote speech at the Edinburgh World Writers Conference celebrated the value of literary experiment; the power of genre fiction to facilitate estranged perception and understanding; and the increasingly 'open' nature of text, which implies a more radically collaborative approach to the creative process. At Edinburgh Miéville threw down a gauntlet to writers, challenging them to celebrate the

democratisation of their craft: "We'll be writing as part of a collective. As we always were." Miéville's is an open and generous vision of creative processes in all the arts: the only thing for which he expresses contempt is the "scandalous and stupid [...] neoliberalisation of children's minds", facilitated through the legal limitation of copyright and the cultural constraint of the concept of creative 'ownership'.

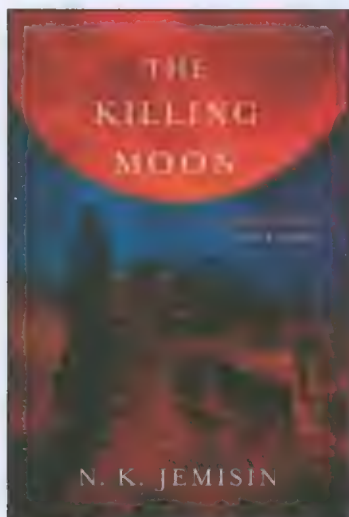
This idea brings us to *Railsea*, China Miéville's ninth novel overall, and his second for young adult readers. Miéville practices what he preaches by offering a cure for psychological neoliberalisation through a narrative which samples and remixes tropes drawn from the nineteenth century tale of adventure. This is a story haunted by Robert Louis Stevenson and, more specifically, Herman Melville. Melville is massively important to *Railsea*: there's more than a near-homophonic link between the nineteenth century master and the high priest of New Weird, but there are other more recent cultural influences in the mix. There are traces of Mervyn Peake, Frank Herbert, Michael Moorcock and twentieth-century apocalyptic cinema. There are narrative riffs that echo aspects of the author's own oeuvre. The humour is a little hit-and-miss at times, but the narrative is so beautifully crafted you wonder if the 'misses', a handful of creaking gags with excruciatingly extended build-ups, have been designed to create metafictional moments of connection between author and reader. Read the book and identify the ingredients for yourself: a review that constrained your reading of *Railsea* would flout the ethos underpinning the book.

It must be clear by now that Miéville asks an awful lot of a young adult audience. In a piece he wrote for *Interzone* in 2003, he promoted the 'new weird' as a fictional form that trusts the reader to

extract meaning without authorial guidance. It's a precept he didn't always abide by in the powerful, complex and politically engaged *Iron Council* (2004), but it's one the author has become more confident in following in the intervening years. It doesn't matter if the reader 'gets' every single gag, allusion or parodic point of reference – young adults won't, and mature readers won't either. There's enough to keep everyone reading.

Funny, thrilling and stomach churning by turns, in the hands of a less gifted storyteller *Railsea* would have been *Moby Dick* with trains, giant moles and a female version of Captain Ahab. Sham Yes ap Soorap – names are as important in *Railsea* as they are in *Gormenghast* – is a teenaged apprentice medical assistant on the Medes. This is a moletrain traversing the barren 'railsea' in search of 'moldywarpes', burrowing giant moles akin to the whales in Melville. In one self-referential aside, the author invites us to consider the symbolic and philosophical nature of the quest for moldywarpes in a very direct way. His deliberate kicking aside of the paraphernalia of fictional realism is one of the many joys of this book.

The story is crammed with the stuff of nineteenth century adventure, classic sf, contemporary fantasy, horror and literary metafiction. Miéville shows no respect for genre boundaries; he undermines the book's classification as a 'young adult' read by making it accessible at several levels of interpretation; and he 'collaborates' with writers he respects, living and dead. There's a more important collaboration, however: the one into which the 'openness' of the storytelling draws the reader. This could all have collapsed into a mess of incoherent metafiction and crap jokes, but Miéville is one of the cleverest and most entertaining of contemporary writers. Don't wait as long as I did to jump onto his train



THE KILLING MOON

N.K. Jemisin

Orbit pb, 404pp, £7.99



THE SHADOWED SUN

N.K. Jemisin

Orbit pb, 492pp, £7.99

Peter Loftus

N.K. Jemisin's debut *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* proved an excellent opener to a career in long-form print, garnering Hugo, Nebula and WFA nominations in 2010, and the ensuing *Inheritance Trilogy* helped foster a loyal and solid fanbase. Readers were drawn in by the lush prose and sensual writing, and Jemisin distinguished herself as a world-builder and creator of mythologies who was firmly committed to stepping beyond what she saw as hackneyed medieval fantasy tropes.

The Killing Moon and *The Shadowed Sun* have been released only weeks apart, comprising the only instalments so far planned for The Dreamblood series. The ancient city-state of Gujaareh slumbers beneath the titular moon as priests of the dream goddess known as 'Gatherers' ply the dark and shadowed rooftops. Their mission is to harvest the dreamblood of the sleeping citizens, healing the needy and bringing justice to the corrupt. But something sinister is stalking the silent streets, killing innocent

dreamers in the goddess's name. Gatherer Ehiru and his apprentice Nijiri are sent to perform their duties on the Kisuati ambassador Sunandi and find themselves drawn into a conspiracy that threatens war between the two nations.

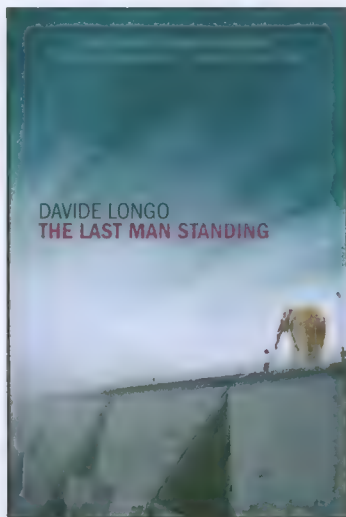
Jemisin patterned the world of *The Dreamblood* after ancient Egypt and, as usual, creates a vivid setting for her tale. But the world-building is more than a mere backdrop for the story. The events and characters depicted could simply not have come to exist in any other setting, so firmly do the action and cast spring from the culture and nations of Gujaareh and the Kisuati. The sheer level of detail and frequency of reference to the customs, religion and politics of the realms concerned have been so heavily laced throughout the text that it can sometimes hinder the reader's involvement, because while the characters are well thought out and distinctive, it quickly becomes obvious that they vie for first place with the stage on which they perform. Similarly, because the narra-



tive is so tightly wound up in the specifics of Jemisin's created world it becomes difficult to identify and relate to the universal plot elements that so engage readers.

The Shadowed Sun picks up the action ten years later. Following from the events of book one, Gujaareh is now a city of violence and oppression, suffering under Kisuati rule. Wanahomen, the last surviving heir of Eninket, seeks to rally the people of the desert to the rebel cause and reclaim his birthright, caught in a web of allies whose loyalty is questionable and whose agendas remain hidden. Once again, death permeates the streets of the city, this time in the form of a dream-borne plague. Nijiri, now chief among the Gatherers, sends for Hanani, the first female priest. The action follows Hanani and mentor Mni-inh as they investigate the pandemic and strive to resist the Kisuati.

Once again, the tone of the novel is dreamlike as Jemisin takes Hanani from naive apprentice to accomplished priestess. However, again, the detailing is anything but subconscious, in this case undermining much of the narrative tension, and meaning that *The Shadowed Sun* is much less absorbing than it was intended to be.



THE LAST MAN STANDING

Davide Longo

MacLehose Press pb, 352pp, £12.99

Ian Sales

It seems almost certain that civilisation as we know it will not last for much longer. If climate change does not bring about a catastrophe, then the failures of nations' economies or the entire capitalist system is sure to do so. Yet, despite ten thousand years of civilisation, the only post-catastrophe stories we tell depict brutal worlds in which violent selfishness is the only mode of survival. This is chiefly because most post-apocalypse tales are in part based on American conceptions of a world without American society. When society goes, the American Dream is over and, we are supposed to believe, the American Dream is such a noble achievement that only animalistic behaviour can exist in the vacuum it leaves behind.

This is all rot, of course. Many US authors may subscribe to such a distorted view of human society, but it's disappointing when other nationalities follow suit. Davide Longo is Italian and *The Last Man Standing* was originally published in Italy in 2010; and it is Italy after some unexplained catastrophe that

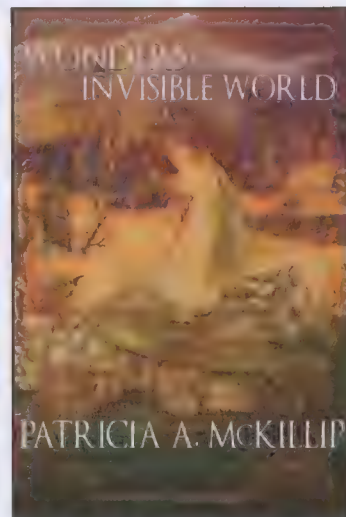
it depicts.

The protagonist, Leonardo, was a famous writer but took himself into self-imposed exile after a sex scandal. Though it was clearly a set-up, he said nothing. This is because he is pathologically passive. For the first one hundred pages he does nothing but witness some of the effects of the collapse of Italy: the village where he lives turns in on itself; outsiders are treated with suspicion and then violence. Perhaps this is not entirely without reason: the villagers wish to keep for themselves what meagre supplies they have.

Leonardo's ex-wife then arrives, with their daughter and her ten-year-old stepson in tow. She is off to Switzerland to fetch papers, but never returns. So Leonardo, Lucia, Alberto and mute companion Sebastiano set out for the border hundreds of kilometres away.

En route, they meet with suspicion, violence, rape, murder and torture from a variety of people. Even when they find what appears to be a safe – if expensive – haven, it's clear the safety is a careful illusion. Eventually, they are captured by a caravan of young people ruled by an antichrist-like figure, Richard. He is disappointingly thinly-characterised and appears to exist only to put Leonardo through a baptism of fire, strengthening him sufficiently to win a contest of wills by cutting off his own hand. If Longo is trying to make a point here, it is wilfully opaque.

There's nothing new in *The Last Man Standing* – indeed, the publishers have made a point of noting it, relying on the quality of Longo's prose to sell the book. In recent years, the post-catastrophe world has become a crowded place in literary fiction, and the time has long since passed when stories set in it might say anything insightful. That Longo's prose is generally good cannot save *The Last Man Standing* from being banal.



WONDERS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD

Patricia A. McKillip

Tachyon Publications pb, 288pp, \$14.95

Maureen Kincaid Speller

In her Guest of Honour speech at Wiscon 2004 (the only previously unpublished item in this collection), Patricia McKillip tells a story about the mossy patch on her back lawn that concealed a cesspool. It is a convenient if unwitting metaphor for these stories. Superficially, they are lyrical, beautiful, opulent even, but they often conceal a harsher truth. The difficulty lies in determining whether the outer wrapping is an attempt to soften that truth or is intended as a lure, forcing the reader to confront the unpalatable.

The duality of McKillip's stories is made most explicit in 'Out of the Woods' (2004) in which Leta, at her husband's suggestion, goes to work for Ansley, an aspiring magician. Dylan's arguments are familiar: more money means greater comfort but if the couple rarely see one another, if Leta in fact works twice as hard, for two men who mostly ignore her, what is the point? The story is a deft interrogation of the dreams that supposedly nourish young women – the promise of a

handsome prince, the prospect of real power – and Leta constantly finds herself poised on the edge of others' stories but her eventual decision is as unsurprising as it is inevitable. 'The Kelpie' (2005) and 'The Knight of the Well' (2012) touch on similar issues, though in these cases the heroines' choices are more clear-cut and follow a more obviously romantic path, while 'Jack O'Lantern' (2006) makes a more overt criticism of the roles often assigned to women in fantasy.

Other stories map a more familiar fantastical territory, though the fact that most have apparently been written for themed anthologies perhaps contributes to a feeling of sameness in tone and subject matter. More than one story teeters on the edge of outright sentimentality, though McKillip's authorial restraint invariably prevails at just the right moment. One or two are less successful; whatever Charles de Lint's introduction might suggest, McKillip seems ill at ease when using contemporary or overtly science-fictional settings, though 'Xmas Cruise' (1993), one of the earliest stories here, suggests that had circumstances been otherwise she might have been a very different writer, perhaps more in the vein of someone like Carol Emshwiller.

On the other hand, de Lint is correct in using the word 'gentle' when discussing McKillip's work. She is an excellent craftswoman; her stories are carefully constructed and highly polished. To read one is to be briefly drawn into a tiny, intricate world. However, to read several without sufficient pause between each is to realise that while McKillip might quietly subvert fantasy tropes, especially in more recent stories, she rarely tests fantasy's boundaries, at least not in short form. Enjoyable as individual stories are, as impressive as the craft is, to read this collection is to sink into a deep pile of velvet cushions that threaten to smother one entirely.



THE MOON MOTH

Jack Vance

Adapted by Humayoun Ibrahim

First Second pb, 114 pp, \$17.99

Duncan Lunan

I read *The Moon Moth* soon after it first appeared in *Galaxy*, 1961, and liked it at once. Set in an archipelago on the planet Sirene, it was packed with ideas, portraying a society so multi-tiered and complex that mediaeval Japan or China would have seemed simple by comparison. And unlike a number of Vance's other protagonists, the central character wasn't an iconoclast who broke free of those restrictions from within, or an outsider who overturned them just when his case seemed hopeless, but an outsider who figured out how to turn them against his opponent. On top of all that there was a detective story with an extraordinary twist: how to identify a killer from off-world in a context where everybody wears masks, and your mask is who you are. He's killed someone and assumed their identity – but whom? And who is he now? The story seems ideally suited to graphic novelisation.

But there is a problem with turning rich prose into pictures.

The best dramatisations of Ray Bradbury's works have been on radio, because in the cinema or on TV the imagery just hasn't lived up to the extraordinary language it displaced. As far as I know, nobody has tried to film anything by Jack Vance yet, and maybe there's a lesson there.

If so, it hasn't put Humayoun Ibrahim off. In taking on *The Moon Moth* as his first graphic novel he has gone in at the deep end, and I have to admire that. The opening and closing images of the planets are spectacular, and I think Ibrahim may have held back on the visual splendour of masked society so that it doesn't overwhelm the complexity of the plot. Off-worlders are supposed to wear unspectacular masks; but the houseboats, for example, are much plainer and more uniform than a Vance fan might expect. We're told that their carvings are intricate, but we don't see them.

One of the many complications Ibrahim has to portray is that on Sirene, to speak to anyone you have to accompany yourself on a musical instrument appropriate to your status and the other person's. There's a fine double-page key to them at the start, but I found the graphics used to represent their sounds confusing, conflicting with other conventions like representing embarrassment by large drops of sweat flying off, or writing YAWN to express boredom. It gets easier with rereading, but I'm still not sure I've fully grasped what's happening in the first six pages, and other sequences later, which have no dialogue and come across as disjointed. I don't have access to a copy of the story at present, to fill in the gaps; and while a picture is usually worth a thousand words, in this case I keep wishing that I did have the text to hand. A graphic novel should make one keen to read the original, or go back to it, but not for that reason.

ADRIFT ON THE SEA OF RAINS
IAN SALES**ADRIFT ON THE SEA OF RAINS**

Ian Sales

Whippleshield Press, 77pp, £5.99hb/£3.99pb

Ian Hunter

This is an attractive little package from Whippleshield Press, the first part of the *Apollo Quartet*. Seventy-seven pages long: forty-three pages of story followed by a list of abbreviations, a glossary, a bibliography, and even some on-line resources. It's a steal at £3.99, so you have no excuse.

I'm not normally the sort of reader who actually bothers with things that appear after the end of the story, like maps, and glossaries, or lists of major characters and which order/house/family they belong to. But I had started *Adrift on the Sea of Rains* and I thought I would make an exception after reading a few pages and thinking – well, knowing – that I hadn't a Scooby what a LCG was (that's Liquid Cooling Garment) or PLSS (Personal Life Support System) so I better check out the 'Abbreviations' pages, and then I started to read the 'Glossary' which outlined all the missions from *Apollo 1* right through to *Apollo 25A/B*, detailing when they flew, who was on-board, what they actually did. Important

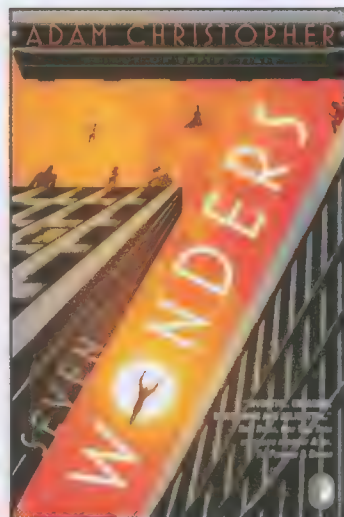
stuff, such as did they make it to the Moon or not, and how long they spent there. I was amazed that *Apollo 7*, the first manned mission (the crew of *Apollo 1* having died in a fire in the command module, leading to *Apollo 4* to *6* being unmanned missions) lasted eleven days while by the time we got to the latter missions they were pushing the thirty days mark.

Then it hit me. What *Apollo 25A/B* mission? Okay, I'll admit to not being the most clued-up guy when it comes to manned spaceflights. I had been suckered by Sales' convincing alternative timeline – the need for longer missions as a precursor to attempts for flights to Mars. The establishment of a base on the Moon. The involvement of the military. But there's more. Hypersonic and supersonic jets and bombers on the American and Russian sides. Project Phoebus, and a mysterious Nazi invention known as The Bell. It all makes perfect sense.

The latest mission to the Moon might be the last. In fact, the last men on the Moon might be the last men period, due to the Cold War heating up. There's no home to go to back to now, and no-one likely to be heading their way unless the Nazi weapon known as The Bell can be harnessed to send them into an alternative reality where the Earth is not a lifeless rock orbiting the Sun.

As the narrative unfolds it is interspersed with the story of Commanding Officer Vance Peterson, who has flown many missions back on Earth, and who now, on the Moon, has to motivate a disparate crew of scientists and loners as a perfect Earth appears which gives them the chance – somehow – of getting home. What follows next is grounded in hard science, hurtling towards a satisfying, yet shocking, conclusion.

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whippleshieldbooks.wordpress.com

**SEVEN WONDERS**

Adam Christopher

Angry Robot pb, 480pp, £7.99

Stephen Theaker

The supervillains of the world are gone, leaving two to fight the bad fight: The Cowl, billionaire industrialist by day, conscience-free killer by night; and Blackbird, his untrustworthy sidekick with a heart of ice. Gangs throughout San Ventura, California wear his omega tag with pride. The city cowers. With no other supervillains to battle, the world's superheroes have retired too, leaving just the Seven Wonders – Aurora's Light, Bluebell, Sand Cat, Linear, Hephaestus, SMART and The Dragon Star – to deal with The Cowl, a job they handle with staggering ineptitude.

Into this comes Tony, who wakes in the night with energy powers, then gains strength, bulletproof skin and flight. New friend Jeannie trains him and creates a costume with her atomic sewing machine, but the question for Tony is what to do with these powers? Take out The Cowl? But if that's obvious to him after just a few days of having powers, why haven't the Seven Wonders done it? That question also troubles Sam Millar, detective on the SVPD

SuperCrime unit, her husband one of thousands killed by The Cowl.

From that point on, *Seven Wonders* could be admired for not going where expected, but where it goes instead could have been more interesting. Though the novel has a detective at its heart, it gives her very little to detect; she doesn't get to unmask anyone, for example. Bluebell's ability to manipulate minds casts doubt over much of the action, but if we take events as read this is a simple story of power that corrupts. The incorruptible heroes are those without character flaws. Those corrupted can be set straight by siphoning off their powers.

Recent comics dealing with similar themes have given us the superbly evil Batman of *Nemesis*, the genocidal Superman of *Irredeemable*, and Invincible battling his own father to defend the human race from enslavement. In *Seven Wonders* there are no grand revelations, no ethical conflicts, no great insights into the way power corrupts over time or the immense pressure that would come with such immense responsibility. Everyone is pretty much what they appear to be, and that's generally either bland or angry. Had the novel's finale revealed the *Seven Wonders* as Billy Batsons pretending to be grown-ups it wouldn't have surprised.

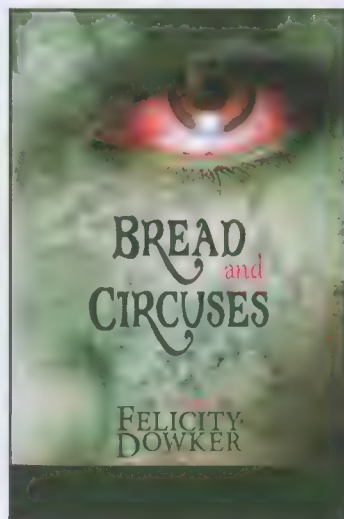
Happily, an alien invasion ends the book on a high, its cosmic fire and fury playing to the strengths of the novel and its heroes better than earthbound plots. The heroes and villains that assemble in space are entertaining and imaginative (Lucifer Now! Lady Liberty and her team of android Presidents! Connectomatic! A Terrible Aspect!), as is, earlier, the explanation for Aurora's Light's awkward name: supervillain Red Tape's "final act of bureaucratic terror", a contract so binding it would wrench the West Coast apart if broken! It's a shame such fun ideas don't play a bigger role in the novel.



BLUEGRASS SYMPHONY

Lisa L. Hannett

Ticonderoga Press pb, 258pp, \$25AU



BREAD AND CIRCUSES

Felicity Dowker

Ticonderoga Press pb, 268pp, \$25AU

Peter Tennant

Nominated for a World Fantasy Award, Australian writer Lisa L. Hannett's collection *Bluegrass Symphony* contains twelve stories that should appeal to readers of both fantasy and horror, with originality as a key note throughout.

Beautifully told, there's a eulogy feel to opening story 'Carousel', with moths descending on the dead body of a girl in a barn, and the bulk of the story telling of how she got there, a tale of bullying and abuse, but with a last line that somewhat redeems that, offering us the option to believe not so much in bad men as in men (and women) who make bad choices. In 'Down the Hollow' a young woman is sacrificed to bring about a much needed thaw, but she isn't the person others believe her to be, with terrible consequences ensuing for the one who loves her most. There's a zombie element to the story, but at its heart is another tale, one that takes in guilt and the need to prove oneself worthy of a parent's love, a tale permeated with sadness and in which the ghosts are our better

selves, the whole played out against the backdrop of a cruel and judgemental society.

Next up is the brilliant 'Them Little Shinin' Things', in which a midwife with designs on the husband of her charge consents to bring a changeling child into the house, only to find herself tricked by the twig-wife. Hannett captures the voice of her narrator perfectly, the self-justifying and hard done by tone, using it to drive the story to its powerful ending, offering a novel twist on the trope of the changeling and some truly macabre imagery as the story works its way into your consciousness and won't let go. 'Fur and Feathers' is even further out there, with fortune telling chickens and a woman married to a were-fox, the story sounding ridiculous in the abstract but working wonderfully well and delighting with the conceits sprinkled throughout the text, at its core a tale of love well lost and found again.

'From the Teeth of Strange Children' was the longest and best story,

told from the viewpoint of a young woman taken by vampires to be a broodmare, the narrative offering a new interpretation of vampires, one that gives a nod in the direction of the aristocratic archetype while allowing an almost unparalleled level of viciousness, the story compelling and with enough wet work to unsettle the most hardened fan of the subgenre. 'Depot to Depot' finds Hannett in a more reflective mode, with the sad tale of a trucker whose role, like that of Charon, is to escort the spirits of the dead to where they are supposed to be, the story throwing the reader a dummy and then gradually revealing its true intent.

And then there's the witty and engaging 'Commonplace Sacrifices' in which a sprite or similar magic being helps a woman to get out of an abusive relationship, the story offering an insight into a magical world that is hidden from most of us, a glimpse of its rules and regulations, the inner workings. The dead body of the opening story is mirrored in the last, 'Forever, Miss Tapekwa County', with beauty contests in which the winner is pickled, the moment frozen in a horrific tableau that has the very opposite effect to that intended, the death of beauty rather than its celebration, a powerful and salutary end to a very strong collection, one that I unreservedly recommend.

Bread and Circuses is a collection by Felicity Dowker who, while her work fits under a fantasy umbrella, shares her countrywoman's blasé attitude to genre boundaries, with a leaning towards the more horrific end of the spectrum. Case in point, 'Bread and Circuses', which is set in a post-zombie apocalypse world, where the living survive in cemeteries, the one place the zombies won't venture, and distraction is provided by a bloody game in which victims are sent out to confront the undead, with a lesbian couple being selected for bucking the community's elite.

The idea here doesn't strike me as particularly plausible, but Dowker writes well, capturing perfectly the love between her two leads and the way in which they are ostracised, showing how prejudice and political manipulation will outlive us all in a powerful tale, so that universal themes overwhelm any objections as to the particular. Next up is the creepy 'Jesse's Gift', which is to sacrifice himself for a friend when the two children are threatened by a demonic Ice Cream Man, the story unsettling for the hints it gives of the true nature of the world and the way in which the most innocent aspects of childhood are corrupted, but offering a core of hope at the personal level, indicating a means to redemption.

'From Little Things...' is a tale of revenge, put in motion when an unhappy man discovers a tiny dragon, the victim of a magician's spell, and helps to set it free, the story both whimsical and entirely serious, with the tension between the two strands playing out to the advantage of both and the guilty delight of the reader. 'Us, After the House Came Back' is one of the finest stories I've read so far this year. The idea is breathtakingly simple, a mysterious substitution along the lines of *Stepford Wives* or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, but we see this from the viewpoint of a child, the daughter of an abused mother, and the matter of fact narration makes the horror of what is happening all the more intense, with a coda to the tale that raises questions about morality and pragmatism, the story powerful and moving in a way that reminded me of Gary Braunbeck's work.

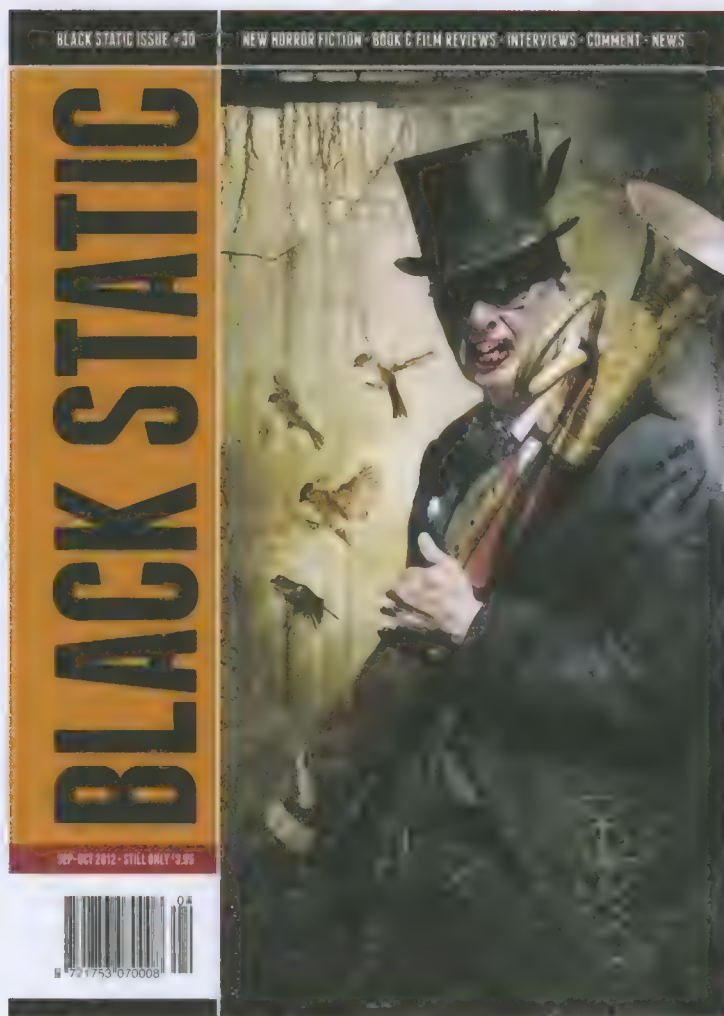
'To Wish on a Clockwork Heart' is another highlight, Dowker taking a familiar plot device and twisting it through a full one eighty degrees to deliver a strikingly original tale, with protagonist Marc encountering a clockwork fairy, the wonderful Pendula, and feeding

her on his blood in exchange for a wish, but of course there is a catch, the story gritty and violent even as it teeters on the edge of absurdity. In 'Phantasy Moste Grotesk', another story that made me think of Braunbeck, a self-absorbed, borderline masochistic couple are lured to a strange carnival, by way of an object lesson in self-discovery, the story disturbingly off kilter and with the suggestion that the 'grotesk' element is only a reflection of inner self. A boy thug, sentenced to community service at an old people's home, encounters 'The Blind Man', a vampire of sorts who feeds on the eyes of his victims, the story cleverly showcasing the idea of the abuser and the abused who grows into that role model.

Forgetfulness is at the heart of 'Nepenthe', a savage story in which a woman who does not wish to feel asks to have her heart locked up by the Secret Squirrel, but then comes a blackly comedic twist, Dowker rendering the almost cartoon nature of what takes place in the darkest of tones to deliver a shocking revelation that undercuts what has gone before and turns the story into a sociopathic fable. 'The Female of the Species is More Deadly Than the Male' has a woman who was forced into an abortion given the chance to swap places with the man who put her through this, the story savage and soliciting both sympathy and glee at the appropriateness of the revenge meted out. Finally the feminism running through many of these stories moves centre stage in 'The Emancipated Dance', as lonely Penny stumbles across a community of women and joins their dance, the story celebrating the feminine principle and its transformative power.

These stories and six others make for a showcase volume, and alongside Hannett's collection it amply demonstrates that fantasy fiction down under is in good hands.

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SEEKING A FRIEND FOR
THE END OF THE WORLD

SOUND OF MY VOICE



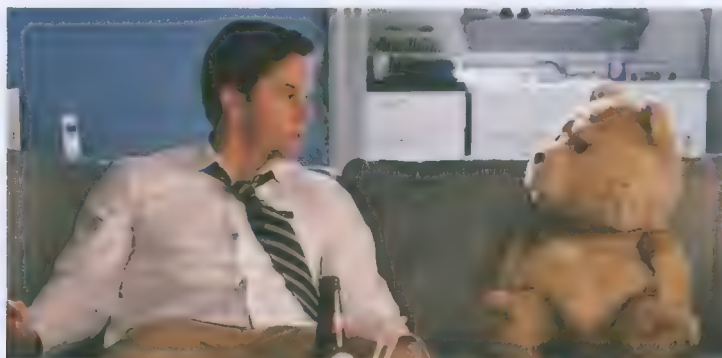
THE WATCH

Eyelid retractors comfortable? Well, no matter; unendurable searing pain is the brom-com buddy of truth. Eyes front, chin up, and feel free to bite down on the gag when you need to scream; we're about to make you a man. Ten films from now, you'll have had everything Hollywood knows about masculinity force-injected into your cortex direct through the optic nerve, and all without the use of a single needle. Oh, no need for that pleading look; trust me, it'll be real horrorshow. Nurse, the drops, and – action!

Here to ease you in gently is **THE WATCH**, in which four spectacularly dysfunctional males in “Glenview, Ohio” sublimate their collective inadequacies into a neighbourhood watch where they beer, bond, mess about with firearms, and combat an invasion of alien bodysnatchers who are murdering locals to wear their skins. As a gallery of derelict masculinity, it could hardly be franker. Ben Stiller is sterile and can't bring himself to tell his broody wife; Jonah Hill lives with his mom and has failed in his dream of passing the police exam; Vince Vaughn is confrontationally overprotective dad to a teenage daughter whose mom is permanently and mysteriously “travelling for work”; and Richard Ayoade is, as you'd imagine, just strange. What they all have in common is

no friends, no lives, and no women who command more than fleeting screen attention. In Seth Rogen's rewrite of what began as a teen-targeted *Ghostbusters* knockoff, theirs is a world where the only people you can trust are you and the guys, and all social interaction is lubricated with product-placed Bud.

Fox have been anxiously waving giant pointing hands around to distract from any reflection of George Zimmerman's ill-fated encounter with Trayvon Martin, dropping *Neighborhood* from the title (thereby improving it hugely) and playing the aliens up and the gun-toting down. But it's hard to see how anyone actually seeing the film could ever be fooled, and indeed one thing *The Watch* has absolutely going for it is its cheery acknowledgment that self-licensed armed vigilantism is a fantasy of civic utility for deeply failed and dangerous individuals. It's nothing like as funny as you'd expect from its quartet of deeply experienced comic performers, with wild card Ayoade visibly less up for improv than his generously indulged teammates, and the plotting is pretty slack; but as a celebration of unrepentant child-manhood, it delivers a potent reassurance that all males have the inalienable right never to grow up, and that everyone else is the weirdoes. The strongest sequence in the film is the montage where ordinary smalltown Ameri-



TED



BRAVE

cans are subjected to suspicious scrutiny for signs of extraterrestrial behaviour to a soundtrack of 'People are Strange'. Despite some drop-in shots of previously unseen females at the end, I think we all know who the real aliens are here.

Seth McFarlane's **TED** explores similar territory with its study of a 35-year-old unable to commit to adult responsibilities because he's held back by the sentient embodiment of his furry childhood id, which hobbles his relationship with unreasonably loving, patient, and hot Mila Kunis by tying him to a bachelor life of slacker masculinity. The plot and the gags inhabit fairly familiar ground for McFarlane and team, waving arms in the air in a moshpit of bad behaviour as Mark Wahlberg and his fuzzy thunder-buddy Ted draw one another down in a death-spiral of appallingness and mutually assured self-destruction through a shared love of weed, beer, and rather gloriously *Flash Gordon* – setting up a live-action dip into *Family Guy*'s overlapping repertory of self-satirising celebrity guests. Essentially a darker, adult extension of *Toy Story*, *Ted* follows through the thought-experiment aspects of Ted's condition as a sentient commodity made specifically to love and be loved but with no legal right to life or self-determination, and if *A.I.* wasn't in the makers' minds it certainly

reverberates in the viewer's; but the rules of Ted's existence are carefully never explained, so that right through the climax we genuinely don't know what it takes to kill him or what level of physical abuse will prove terminal. There's much fine comic observation of how male besties riff, and a reasonable supply of startlingly funny scatter jokes, like the duck named James Franco and the varieties of high branded Mind Rape, Gorilla Panic, They're Coming! They're Coming!, and This Is Permanent. But in the end it's Kunis's character who has to learn the bigger lesson and make the choice that will snag her man by accepting, rather than resisting, that part of him that will always be a dick.

Coming-of-age bear movies might seem a bit of a niche genre, so the sighting of two in a single hunting season is cause to crack out the picnic basket and weaponry – even if the once-infallible Pixar process is starting to look decidedly vulnerable, having replaced directors on two summer tentpoles in a row and still wound up with *Cars 2* and now **BRAVE**. Throughout its painful production, *Brave* had a lot riding on it, not just as the showcase for Pixar's first female lead and director, but far more momentously as its first candidate for nomination to the elite branded sorority of Disney Princesses. It's still not clear exactly

why original director Brenda Chapman was eased out in favour of Mark Andrews (one of Brad Bird's people from *The Iron Giant*, whose major work to date was as Andrew Stanton's co-writer on *John Carter*) or where accountability divides for what the film's become; but the overwhelming impression is of a bunch of clueless males thumbing hopelessly through a manual with no index entry for Girls. Despite subjecting the Miyazaki oeuvre (here especially *Princess Mononoke*) to the kind of sustained institutional autopsy normally reserved for crashed UFO pilots, Pixar's notoriously all-guy brains trust still can't figure out the most basic things about female narrative anatomy.

Feisty Princess Merida has feisty hair and feisty weapon skills, and is none too pleased about this whole exchange-of-women business that commodifies her as an object of transactional value between patriarchal kinship groups in a heuchter-teuchter tartanverse of no discernible historicity (or century). But by a curious wrench of narrative logic, this is not actually blamed on her menfolk but on her mother, for her willing complicity in the system that steals Merida's right to self-determination; so when Merida gets her Katniss on in the perilous forest and follows the dotted line of plot wisps to the spell that will Change her Fate, the film



THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN

undergoes a shaggy transformation of its own into a damp mother-daughter team-building wilderness holiday, at the end of which Merida saves her mum from turning hairy on the inside by her sewing skills on horseback. Disappointingly non-epic despite its evocative setting, it features well-spoken Hollywood Scots performing in carefully pitched simulations of their lost native accents in which even the name of their parent company is on a list of forbidden words and has to be pronounced “doesnae”; while Merida herself gets forcibly stuffed into a corset scene to show her defiance of her fate, because all boys know that what girls really want is to be boys. Whatever she does, she certainly Disney Princess.

A boy becomes a man all over again in **THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN**, which sweeps up the pieces of what was supposed to be Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man 4* and drops them into a recast and rebooted parallel universe where everything is strangely familiar and yet unnervingly not quite as good. As with *X-Men: First Class*, the exercise is the product of two unstoppable forces of natural law: the need for studios to keep spitting out films in order to fend off the reversion of rights to a confident, hungry Marvel (who already look set to claw back Daredevil from Fox if Joel Carnahan’s version

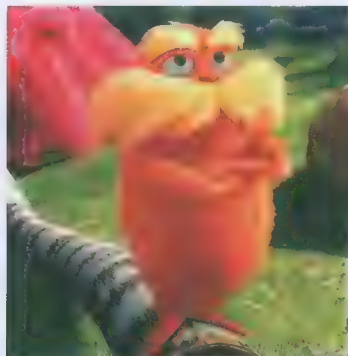
isn’t in production by October), and the special pressures of casting turnaround on their teen-led properties. Acceptable on its own terms, Marc Webb’s version of Spidey’s origin is unfortunately shadowed at every turn by invidious comparisons. Andrew Garfield is even older than Tobey Maguire was on his first spider-bite, and while (as in *Never Let Me Go*) he’s an extremely accomplished impersonator of teen body language and mannerism, there’s something uncanny-valley about watching these highly skilled twentysomething professionals affecting youth through virtuoso mimicry. (“I’m seventeen years old!” protests Emma Stone’s Gwen, to incredulous guffaws from actual teenagers watching.) Martin Sheen might be an acceptable Ben Parker if it weren’t for the memory of Cliff Robertson, and the best that can be said for Sally Field as Aunt May is that it was brave of her even to put herself in the path of a comparison to Rosemary Harris. At least the Lizard is the villain Raimi intended, even if poor Dylan Baker, who waited so patiently in the role of Curt Connors through three Raimi films for his turn in the spotlight of evil, has been eased out for Rhys Ifans; but whatever Raimi might have had in mind for the character, the *Amazing* version is very weakly written (“I was angry, so I stayed away from you and your family”) and surprisingly



THE DARK KNIGHT RISES

unimpressive as a digital monster.

Raimi’s original was a very, very tight film, and seems to have been timed to the second; the spider sinks its fangs in at exactly 10’0”, whereas in the 2012 version the best part of an hour has been squittered on leisurely character business before the games are finally allowed to get under way. The services of J. Jonah Jameson and his Daily Bugle support cast are no longer required, to the film’s considerable loss, and even the non-rebooted bits of the storyline are heavily recycled; the Lizard’s master scheme is lifted from *Batman Begins*, as indeed is much of Peter’s orphan-into-vigilante journey. Peter’s teacher offers a retrospective excuse at the end: “I had a professor once who liked to tell his students that there were only ten plots in all of fiction. I’m here to tell you there’s only one: Who Am I?” And sure enough, in its barrel-diving search for some, any opportunities left unexploited by Raimi’s challenge-proof original, the new version has lit on the missing backstory of Richard and Mary Parker – though despite much frantic onscreen Binging (which the film attempts to make exciting by zooming kinetically around the query box) it’s never actually progressed in this instalment, and as Marvel tighten their grip on the rights to S.H.I.E.L.D. we can be fairly sure that something antica-



THE LORAX

nonical is in store if we ever get there.

As one superhero franchise reboots, another powers down in **THE DARK KNIGHT RISES**, the mad, messy, occasionally magnificent *Götterdämmerung* of the Nolan-Goyer Batverse. Even Nolan losing the plot completely is a thrilling spectacle in itself, and nobody could accuse him of not self-destructing in style, as he ramps up the thematic ambition from systemic dysfunction in the American city to the inequality that allows Bruce Wayne, and thus Batman, to exist at all. The film's richly muddled politics invite a plethora of contradictory readings: is Bane's manipulative demagoguery, with its true aim of Gotham's total destruction, a lie built on truth or a truth built over lies? Is the Wayne dream of "no fossil fuels, free clean energy for an entire city" an instrument of salvation or destruction? Is living so large and leaving so little a necessary evil or a sign of societal failure? A close look behind Selina Kyle as she delivers her resonant "There's a storm coming" speech reveals that the doors behind her are bannered THE WILLIAM BEVERIDGE HALL – an appropriately cryptic Gotham City monument to the architect of British welfarism, only partly explained by its civilian identity as the south block foyer of the University of London Senate



ICE AGE 4: CONTINENTAL DRIFT

House. I was round the corner as this scene was shot, eerily enough at a conference on social class. But maybe it was all a dream; much of the time the film feels trapped in its own *Inception* limbo of dream logic and spectacle, in which familiar faces from that film reappear among the Batman cast as characters who all one way or another turn out to be someone else.

If the film's refusal to hang together is part of what makes it compelling, it doesn't repair the deeper narrative incoherence between the disparate elements of its universe that find themselves thrown together in a single unwieldy plot. One problem is Bane, whom Goyer and Nolan have worked hard at recuperating as a figure of genuine darkness and threat after his dismal screen representations in *Batman & Robin* and the animated television series. But in shoehorning the character's preposterous origin story into the film, they not only breach the fragile hull of their vessel's credibility but force a bizarre detour across half the world whose only visible rationale is that it recapitulates the one from two films back. Anne Hathaway's Selina sinks her claws satisfyingly into her iconic character, but while it would be a crime to wish her out of the film it's not easy to say what she's doing in it, let alone Juno Temple as her kitten; the climactic revelation

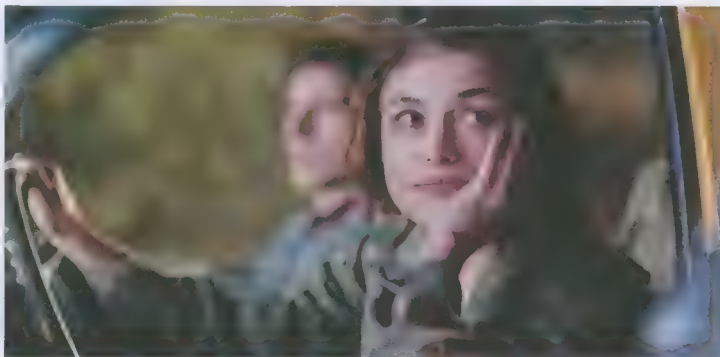
about Gordon-Levitt's character is not only naff in itself but cheats by moving outside existing canon altogether; while Michael Caine spends the first half of the film being monstrously overindulged, then abruptly takes the rest of the film off. With a ghastly irony almost as incredible as the rise in Colorado gun sales fuelled by the belief that cinemagoing would be safer if more of the audience were tooled up for a shootout, James Holmes was reported as asking prison staff how the film ended – though it would actually have been obvious enough if he'd been paying a bit more attention in that first half-hour. (My notes on Alfred's "You didn't find a life" speech read "We're going to visit that cafe at the end.") Some feel the scene would have been better for keeping the top spinning and ending on the shot of Caine, while others like to think that what we see through his eyes is a fantasy or a dream. Perhaps it all was, and the storm is still coming. We'll never know till the next reboot.

The power of capitalism to unbalance the world is also the theme of **DR SEUSS' THE LORAX**, in which Seuss's late-period environmentalist icon finds itself wrapped in a new frame-story expanding on the kid who hears the Once-ler's story and is entrusted with the last truffula seed. Thneedville,



THE DINOSAUR PROJECT

like a Seussopolis mirror image of Bane's Gotham, is a tyrannical island state, humanity's last redoubt in the night land of post-truffula devastation wrought by the Once-ler's out-of-control theened industry. But where in Seuss our hero was entrusted with the big Unless, here he's caught up in a battle with an industrial-baron villain, with rather more edged weapons than we're used to in Seuss, and a reassuringly diluted version of the Dr's famously unfeeling message "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better; it's not." *The Daily Show's* researchers certainly struck gold with their beyond-satire exposure of the Mazda CX-5 SUV's role as the film's promotional partner. But it's entirely in keeping with this *Lorax's* own argument since, fortunately for the planet's future, caring a whole awful lot turns out to be spectacularly effortless, involving no sacrifice, change of lifestyle, or abandonment of consumer market capitalism and growth-based economic models. Merely surviving the climactic stunt chase and planting the seed in the middle of town is enough in itself to trigger the *Lorax's* return to earth on a ray of light like a short furry moustachioed Jesus, for a hug and a "You done good." If it was that easy to save the world, we wouldn't hardly need to do it.



ICE AGE 4: CONTINENTAL DRIFT

The globe-changing power of hard-shelled seeds is the engine driving **ICE AGE 4: CONTINENTAL DRIFT**, which sees the increasingly bonkers catastrophist series turn its attention to plate tectonics as our serially luckless herd of furry misfits, who have survived glaciation, global warming, and a lost world ("We fought dinosaurs in the ice age. It didn't make sense but it sure was exciting!") now find themselves stranded by sudden lithospheric subduction on different landmasses for the male and female characters. Since geological timescales don't really work with Hollywood pacing, a prologue demonstrates the unabashedly cartoon geophysics driving the mechanism which segregates the characters from the original film on the wrong side of a new ocean from mammoth Manny's latter girlfriend on a more Roland Emmerich set-piece schedule. ("Go to the land bridge!" he yells. "You'll be safe on the other side!") In a cheerful garbling of the concept, the land bridge proves to be a bridge made out of, um, land.) A strange and intermittently entertaining series of *Waterworld*-like ocean escapades follows, before the gang are reunited and bachelor loser Sid delivers his cryptic life-lesson "I gave up a pack, but I got something better: a herd." Those accustomed to snoozing through everything but the *Scrat* gags have to wait till

the surreal *Scrat* Atlantis coda for anything up to the usual standard, but that won't be a problem for those who've made it this far; as Sid's grandma dismissively observes, "I slept through the comet that killed the unicorns." *Continental Drift* includes a credit for "Materials, Fur and Procedural Geometry": possibly what our ancestors had to make do with before the invention of alcohol, tobacco, and firearms.

There's more dubious family-bonding and cryptoecology in odd UK/South African coproduction **THE DINOSAUR PROJECT**: an unusual venture into family-oriented found footage, tracking a Congolese expedition by the "British Cryptozoological Society" on the trail of *mokele mbebe* who crash their copter in an entire lost world of digital creatures. Fortunately the (supposedly) fifteen-year-old hero has brought along a seemingly inexhaustible supply of miraculously waterproof electronics, and the first principle of found-footage cinema – that nobody survives – is followed through rather effectively till the final wriggle-out. Tone and performances are all over the place, from a surprisingly scary *Cloverfield*-style sequence of a camp under siege from mini-dinos in night vision to some rather less effective father-son business where you say "I love you" before plummeting off a cliff in the usual way. The loca-



SOUND OF MY VOICE

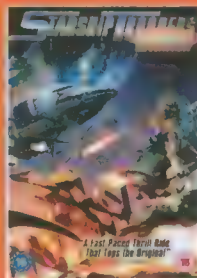
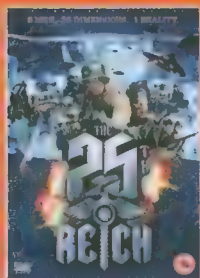
tions are lovely, and there's some nostalgic pleasure in seeing such a deeply old-fashioned lost-world tale, from a genre that has been more or less extinct since the end of the age of exploration, attempted for the *Jurassic Park* generation; but some of the cheaper effects verge on *Birdemic*, and the dialogue is beyond the cast's limited powers to salvage.

A more contemporary vein of catastrophist comedy is to be found in Lorene Scafaria's **SEEKING A FRIEND FOR THE END OF THE WORLD**, which sees Steve Carell abandoned by his wife a fortnight from no-survivors asteroid strike, and hooking up instead with kooky English vinyl-exotica junkie Keira Knightley on a road trip to eve-of-apocalypse resolution, in what is essentially a lightweight and not terribly good indie vehicle which has managed to land some incongruously big-name leads and been optimistically marketed to a much wider audience than would ever want to see it. An initial stream of mildly amusing throwaway last-days gags dries up early, and to do any of the rather tiresome things it wants to do the film has to take a stance of forced breeziness towards the imminent demise of, for example, all the children who appear so chirpily unterrified. Carell and Knightley share the kind of romantic chemistry that produces

only acrid vapours and a driving need to throw yourself out of the window before you asphyxiate, and it only gets worse when it turns out that what Carell needs is to tell his estranged father he loves him, while Knightley's quest to be with her family at the end proves less important than a one-nighter with a middle-aged depressive. If you didn't know, you'd never believe that such a character, and such a relationship, could have been written by a woman; but at least it shows that anything guys can do, women can do worse.

The end may or may not be nigh in cult drama **SOUND OF MY VOICE**, the second part of the 2011 Sundance sf one-two from the enterprising Georgetown indie trio of directors Zal Batmanglij and *Another Earth*'s Mike Cahill, and their increasingly iconic co-writer and star Brit Marling. Undercover documentarists Christopher Denham and Nicole Vicius infiltrate a cult headed by the sinisterly disarming Maggie, who claims to be from 2056 and preparing a group of initiates for the end of their world. From very early on, you can predict two things with absolute surety: that the sceptical Denham and the open-minded Vicius will swap positions; and that the ambiguity over whether Maggie is what she says or what the authorities say she is will not be resolved in

the film, though audiences will be given permission to believe in the more interesting possibility. *Sound of my Voice* was written as a serial project, the first of three parts, any or all of which could be realised as films, webseries, or serial television, and the film itself is structured in ten internal episodes of varying length (down from an exhausting 22 in the early drafts). Batmanglij and Marling have said that they know what the ultimate answer is, and a sympathetic viewer of their film can guess fairly confidently at the solution; but unless the trilogy is made the answer will be forever in the future, and to go there you'll simply have to believe. An inspirational model for have-a-go filmmakers with no money, no permits, and no ending, they make it all look easy – and to an extent it is, when nothing needs to be resolved and all you need to do is to keep the flow of questions bouncing back and forth between the walls and the tension ratcheting as the stakes rise to marvellously creepy climax. But it's so satisfying, and such a fantastic showcase for Marling's steely fragility, that you scarcely mind that little by little it moves away from its female characters to be all about Denham's scarred relationship with his dad and the wall of science he throws up to protect his need to believe. Marling likes to tell a story of auditioning for a part, as a young blonde seeking her place in Hollywood, where she had to find some inner connection to being dragged screaming by her hair. But perhaps even she can see that film compels us to see girls as inscrutable aliens from the future, and that the secret handshake is finally just for the boys. There now. I think we can take these off now and remove the restraints, and if you allow yourself to be quiet now and again, to really be still, you'll hear the sound of my voice. Oh dear, nurse, I'm afraid he's got away from us.



LASER FODDER TONY LEE

THE 25TH REICH

BLOODSTORM

OUTPOST II: BLACK SUN

PLANET 51

STARSHIP TROOPERS:
INVASION

AO - THE LAST HUNTER

BATTLESHIP

LOCKOUT

ALPHAS - SERIES ONE

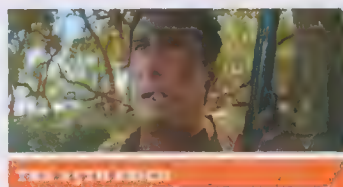
WRATH OF THE TITANS

NAZI STOMP

Perhaps it is just a coincidence, but since *Interzone's* coverage of *Iron Sky*, last issue, a batch of other Nazi-themed, or plain old Naziplotation, movies have now appeared.

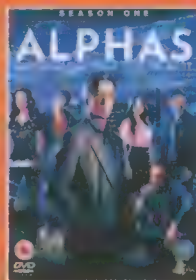
THE 25TH REICH (DVD/Blu-ray, 16 July) is reportedly "based on the classic novella *50,000 Years Until Tomorrow* by J.J. Solomon", a book allegedly published in 1944 but which appears to be just a charming little hoax by the filmmakers to give their project some authentic retro cult appeal, just as director Stephen Amis shoots in four-camera 'megarama'. The ghost of *Zone Troopers* (1985) haunts a time-travelling squad of GIs in this B-movie. From the gravelly voice of a growling sergeant, and WW2 soldiers finding a faulty UFO, the sketchy cross-genre wartime sci-fi which *The 25th Reich* wraps around its main characters reflects on the nostalgically precise caricatures in a winningly affectionate pulp parody of Danny Bilson's directorial debut, made before he disappeared into TV work.

Amis plugs other equally clichéd episodes into his troopers' mission brief, and so sergeant, corporal, private, and rifleman alike are timewarped into survival battles against prehistoric giant insects, not even the first of several cheesy but fun creatures conjured here by some bargain priced CGI. Standing stones with mystical Ouroboros markings are the control/source of a cosmic vortex. There's an under-



cover spy from the Luftwaffe, a lesson in how to hot-wire a time machine, and a fast-forward shift to a new Germany of 2243, where giant spider-bots issue humorous timeline updates to baffled mid-20th century guys. One arachno-borg demonstrates *Deliverance* redneck mentality with POW victimisation by sodomy, and it's not just the one tasteless scene that makes this largely knockabout adventure an only variably effective comedy flick. As the armada of flying saucers are launched from a futuristic Earth into hyperspace, we must wonder how on earth our trio of bold heroes could possibly avert "the fascist domination of the universe" and win the impending final battle to preserve "good old American freedom". One day we might find out, if amusingly touted sequel *The 25th Reich and the War with God* is ever made.

Nazis at the Centre of the Earth is released in the UK as **BLOODSTORM** (DVD, 6 August). The first feature by director Joseph J. Lawson, the visual effects creator who made 2001's CG-animation TV show *Dan Dare*, this is another product from Asylum studios and continues the mock-buster brand's improvement in general respectability for occasionally impressive



and inventive surprises, if not its actual stock value. Angel of death Dr Mengele and Nazi hordes kidnap some American researchers in Antarctica. The baddies carve up their victims (cowed by expectations that they're only being carted off to the showers) for transplant surgery intending to prolong the lives of zombified WW2 troops in this hollow world shocker. Yes, it's like a Jules Verne adventure meets Norwegian horror comedy *Dead Snow* (*Black Static* #12). For many scenes the actors gaze at wonders off-screen, so rarely are the spectacular visual effects and performers integrated into the same shot. In this, *Bloodstorm* harks back to those bad old days of straight-to-video schlock, with sexploitation terrors and suitably gross dreadfulness only stymied by tacky effects. The creation of mecha Hitler (like a *BSG* remake Cylon toaster with Adolf's head attached) is quite irresistibly silly enough to raise laughter.

As previously seen in *Iron Sky*, there is a giant mothership, launched from the remnants of the Fatherland to menace all mankind with ghastly inhumanity. Yikes! If terrible acting won't save it – with Jake Busey (*Starship Troopers*, Asylum's updated *War of the Worlds*) portraying the chief scientist and

traitor, and Dominique Swain (*Lolita* remake, *Face/Off*), mainly useful as the heroine because she happens to know some German – director Lawson does at least manage to steer his comical mess into territories of sickly gruesome entertainment and climactically explosive absurdities. Swain's heroine keeps her own face on for her inevitable showdown with that furious Führer, but some of her skinned-alive co-stars are not so lucky. The Australian pilots in the finale radio in a UFO report, even though their enemy's gigantic flying fortress has billboard swastikas on its hull. This is simply ludicrous nonsense that attempts a casual offensiveness but is, perhaps, merely an exaggerated reflection upon the state of political folly and cultural ignorance characterising madhouse Tea Party campaigns or statements by virulent Tories.

Steve Barker's **OUTPOST II: BLACK SUN** (DVD/Blu-ray, 27 August) is a sequel to *Outpost* (which I praised in *Black Static* #7), a welcome British effort, making the best of clearly limited production resources for grimly atmospheric, suitably chilling mystery-horror. Whereas the first movie centred on mercenary DC (Ray Stevenson), this focuses on venge-

ful heroine Lena (Catherine Steadman, Max Jacoby's *Dust*). She teams up with Wallace (Richard Coyle, TV series *Strange*), who is also on the trail of doomed engineer Hunt (Julian Wadham, returning). Following clues from Paraguay, where Lena discovered an SS officer from the death camps, they approach the hidden bunker in eastern Europe, where danger lurks from an army of Nazi immortals (read that as zombies). Forewarned that the "Reich of a thousand years" is not hiding from enemies, but just "waiting in shadows", Lena and Wallace are hardly surprised when they find the secret WMD is a unified-field EMP generator with 'poetry' at its core. As in *Outpost*, there is a sense of unearthly power that is about to be unleashed and once again it plays like a cross-genre riff on *The Keep*, albeit with some eerie sci-fi instead of occultism. Although *Outpost II* is troubled by some annoyingly grainy night-vision visuals, the vile green effect is used so judiciously that nothing important to the main action is spoilt. I have often been very critical of recent British genre movies, so it is a genuine pleasure to find well produced efforts like this, combining action horror and sci-fi mystery tropes in such an imaginative way. Kudos to director Barker for making a sequel that improves on the original, and the prospects for a spin-off, *Outpost: Rise of the Spetsnaz* (due 2013), from the same co-writer (Rae Brunton), and a producer turned director (Kieran Parker), look good.

ANIMAGIC

Just like CGI has replaced almost every kind of special effects technology – including matte paintings, transformation scenes, stop-motion figures – and has also supplanted set construction with green-screen virtuality backgrounds (and even costumes can be illusory), so digital CG animation provides an often superior alternative to traditional handcrafted 2D cell animation, whether the CGI work is in a photo-real style or not. I have almost lost interest in standard cartoon animation. The quality of the artwork in many anime movies remains appealing but a greater sense of realism and a fluidity of movement means that CG animation, such as cartoonishly stylised Pixar productions or motion-capture fantasies like Robert Zemeckis' *Beowulf* (2007), seems very likely to usurp flatly drawn cell animation in the international movie marketplaces. Driven by the demands of video gaming, CG animation has developed sufficiently well in this century and built upon artistic successes of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001), *Appleseed*



PLANZET

(2004) and its sequel *Appleseed Ex Machina* (2007), and Fumihiko Sori's *Vexille* (2007) and *To* (2009). With its frequent emphasis on hardware (cityscapes or starships) and imaginative otherworldly environments, science fiction is particularly suited for CG presentations. It feels appropriate that depictions of the space futurism should use the latest technology and there's a keen sense that CG animation is simply leaving flat cell animation techniques behind in the past. Although many hand-drawn cartoons may still be viewed with a measure of nostalgic respect



STARSHIP TROOPERS: INVASION

as creative and artistic endeavours of a bygone era, more 21st century animation productions should opt for the heightened realism of imagery with photographic qualities that CG animation can offer. Thankfully, this is what appears to be happening, although very slowly, and not a moment too soon.

With a first human colony on Mars screening immigrants for Esperanza base, **PLANZET** (DVD, 27 August) begins with a striking retro visual appeal that's not unlike the CGI scenes in live-action movies *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, Kazuaki Kiriya's *Cas-*

Although *Quest For Fire* (1981) remains by far the finest drama entertainment about prehistory, with a serious attempt at realism, here's something new that's worthwhile. **AO – THE LAST HUNTER** (DVD, 23 July) is a French docudrama by Jacques Malaterre (maker of similarly themed documentaries for TV), with voiceover narration (English, or French with subtitles) telling a nomadic story of Neanderthal loner Ao (Simon Paul Sutton), who confronts extinction via homo sapiens. Wandering from Siberia, heading south across Europe, Ao is searching for his long-lost twin brother and the remnants of their childhood clan. It's a journey through rugged spectacular landscapes troubled by misperceptions of evil spirits, predatory war-painted hyena-men, and daily fears of the unknown. Ao's hobbies include rock-climbing, camping, and al fresco dining. He learns cave-painting while beguiled by tribal drumming, practices horse-whispering, and mates vigorously with girlfriend Aki (British export Aruna Shields, femme fatale in Bollywood mystery thriller *Prince*). Ao survives long enough to produce offspring, and he mourns – while apparently understanding – what the loss of his kind means for humanity. It presents a myth that falls back on a familiar belief about nobility among savages for its emotional impact. As one of Douglas Adams' commentators quipped in *Hitchhikers*: "the secret is to bang the rocks together, guys".

Actor turned director Peter Berg, whose most notable genre performances include the UFO/alien abduction horror *Fire in the Sky* and Wes Craven's *Shocker*, went behind the camera for *Very Bad Things* (1998), about a stag night in Las Vegas that results in black comedy splatter. The Amazon adventure vehicle for Dwayne 'the Rock' Johnson *Welcome to the Jungle* (2003) was followed by a marked improvement in Berg's skill as a director of gritty action cinema in *The Kingdom* (2007), a story about FBI agents investigating Saudi Arabian terrorism. Superhero comedy *Hancock* (2008) was a terribly uneven urban fantasy starring Will Smith, and Berg's underrated TV

shern, and Mamoru Oshii's millennial *Avalon*. Its techno aesthetic is also somewhat reminiscent of the otherworldly designs and weird aliens of CG-anime *Evangelion: 1.0: You Are (Not) Alone*, and its sequel *Evangelion: 2.0 You Can (Not) Advance*. Such retro styling is not always successful, as we have seen before in the likes of *A.Li.Ce* and *Blue Remains*, but in *Planzet* it becomes highly effective in concealing the lack of sharper degrees of photo-realism. The characters are generally sketchy but then, with a run-time of just 53 minutes, so is the plotting for this futuristic invasion-of-Earth movie. Only a few survivors of the alien FOS attack remain on the devastated world. Five years later, from urban ruins, Japanese layabout pilots are bullied back to active duty for mankind's last desperate counter-strike, using the experimental weaponry of 'GL' (geometric limbs): basically immense robots armed with oversized guns that are common in sci-fi anime and manga source works. The flimsy characters and short duration are not faults in *Planzet*. This is clearly a story where any heroes are defined by their actions,

and this is fairly good fun as a medley of battling mega mecha clichés.

Coming from director Shinji Aramaki, maker of the aforementioned *Appleseed* flicks, animated feature **STARSHIP TROOPERS: INVASION** (Blu-ray/DVD, 27 August) finds the galactic war is going better than ever, but this addition to the existing trilogy plays without any of the satirical jibes or mordant wit that characterised the live-action movies. Humorous asides notwithstanding, Aramaki is doing his part, continuing the adventures of General Johnny Rico, Captain Carmen Ibanez, and psi corps agent Carl Jenkins – who is up to no good while gathering actionable intel from a bug queen in a brain-hacking episode that goes awry and results in a hi-jacked starship on target for Earth. Along the way, it takes advantage of synchronicity glitches in vast trans-milieu confluences, replicating compatible ideas from the continuums of *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5* franchises. Yes, they nick stuff.

Ever since Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* in 1997, the live-action trilogy derived from Hein-

lein's Hugo-winning 1959 novel has engaged in unofficial subgenre competition with the *Aliens* movies. Although the saga of Ripley has explored a wider variety of SF-horror themes, the *Starship Troopers* trilogy proved to be far more than average quality space opera, crafting a future-history sequence of militaristic thrillers.

Here, rugged power-suits for mobile infantry deployment benefit from latest mo-cap techniques, and this sci-fi soup is boiling towards save-the-world antics again. There is a winning climax, confronting a monstrous bitch that is a roving counterpart to the planet-bound Lovecraftian king Behemecoytal in *Starship Troopers 3: Marauder*, so this is not just another 'hoo-ah!' bug hunt. It's superior to 1999's TV series *Roughnecks*, and furthermore, in terms of advances in CG animation, it is also much better than Martyn Pick's *Ultramarines: A Warhammer 40,000 Movie* (2010).

New releases of CG animated movies continue with *Resident Evil: Damnation* (DVD/Blu-ray, 24 September), while the forthcoming educational feature *Odyssey 2050* also looks promising.



movie *Virtuality* (2009) relaunched the filmmaker's career into space opera. **BATTLESHIP** (DVD/Blu-ray, 20 August) finds new toys in play for an alien invasion blockbuster and a two-hour movie that's really nothing more than an expensively overblown trailer advert for a Hasbro videogame. A mountaintop Beacon project beams signals (cue the first of many ridiculously OTT visual effects) to an Earth-like alien planet without expecting a direct response. Upsetting some Pacific naval exercises off Hawaii, a formation of incoming UFOs arrive like WMD strikes for a 'They're here!' worst-case-scenario, with a bunch of *War of the Worlds* schlock 'n' awe clichés. Pedantically slow first act

dialogues state the bleeding obvious like droll overdubs. Basically, it's just *Transformers* meets *Battle: Los Angeles*, all at sea. What if the aliens from *The Abyss* were not friendly Spielbergian CE3K visitors? Genre riffs on *Independence Day* are blatant, with extra *Pearl Harbour* and *Titanic* spectacle.

Whereas the ten times cheaper *Skyline* felt genuinely apocalyptic, *Battleship* is too clearly a corporate product aiming to exploit war-gamers' culture. RIMPAC fleets are trapped inside force-field isolation, while demolition drones attack and lay waste to urban landscapes. Iron Man styled Predator lite intruders are combat scouts. Loser turned hero Lieutenant Hopper (Taylor Kitsch, better in *John Carter*) is left in charge of destroyer USS *John Paul Jones*, but he loses even that place to make a stand. Bland mononymous singer Rihanna falls at every hurdle in her frankly laughable attempt to emulate Michelle Rodriguez (*Avatar*) or Jenette Goldstein (*Aliens*). A stalwart Liam Neeson coasts through on autopilot as the sidelined admiral. Tsunami buoys form a detector grid when radar fails. A paraplegic veteran and a techie, far out of his depth, make for a human story sideshow but, as in Hopper's case, the acquisition of courage is required. Berg is ready and willing to be this year's Michael Bay substitute for cinema's 'great explosions challenge' Olympics. WW2 fighting spirit resurfaces in the workable strategy of low-tech solutions to hi-tech problems. *Battleship* is enormously good fun if we overlook its vacuous characters, flimsy plotline, and US Navy recruitment poster affect. However, it's rather depressing to think about it afterwards and realise that it's not even half as entertaining as 20-year-old action thriller *Under Siege* (still Steven Seagal's most successful vehicle), which also featured the battleship USS *Missouri*.



Before John Carpenter even attempts to complete his first official trilogy by following *Escape From New York* (1981) and *Escape From L.A.* (1996) with something like an 'Escape From America', here's the LEO version, **LOCKOUT** (Blu-ray/DVD, 20 August), about a lone hero launched to a space prison to rescue the president's daughter from rioting psycho inmates. With a plot as tightly structured as the rank and file moves of chess, and some action scenes depicted obviously/intentionally by the fuzzy unreality of video-game quality images instead of Hollywood's current photo-real standard, it's clear that none of this should be taken seriously. And, anyway, it's riddled with twists and coincidences that are so unlikely – even for a late 21st century setting – it appears the laws of probability have been suspended in favour of comic book clichés, sarcastic one-liners, and throwaway visual gags. However, such narrative faults hardly matter if viewers are having fun watching this brainless and utterly predictably nonsense: in space, no one can hear you squee.

As a sci-fi project initiated by Luc Besson, this nimbly pickpock-

ets ideas from Lewis Teague's *Wedlock* (1991), Geoff Murphy's *Fortress 2* (2000), Dante 01 (2008), and *Cargo* (2008), but generally shares its lighthearted tone with Lamont Johnson's *Spacehunter* (1983). Indeed, despite a pair of violent Scottish brothers as the villains, *Lockout* is primarily a live-action cartoon/comic book adventure that almost does for penal colony movies what the Wachowskis' *Speed Racer* did for rally cars. Lacklustre protagonist Snow (Guy Pearce) would never have graduated from the John McClane school of action heroes but he does – rather smugly – try out some *Die Hard* quips for the sake of it. Never daring to follow in the footsteps of Kurt Russell, Pearce's Snow is a CIA cypher, lacking any shred of Snake Plissken's bitingly cynical attitude. The only anarchistic note in Snow's character is that he smokes. Some risibly idiotic officialese by authority figures might charitably be interpreted as a welcome infusion of satirical humour, but the level of wit in most dialogue hardly rises above Snow's obvious jokes. Rent this, don't buy it. Buy beer instead. It's definitely a popcorn and/or beer movie.



After TV series *Heroes*, here's more of the same again without costumes or code names. **ALPHAS – SERIES ONE** (DVD, 24 September) is co-created by Zak Penn, a contributor on the writing side to Marvel-based movies. Slickly concocted, more like *X-Files* than *X-Men*, yet initially lacking any strong characters like the main cast of *Fringe*, *Alphas* presents half a dozen plainclothes superheroes. There's smart Nina (Laura Menell, Janey in *Watchmen*), who is all mind-control via eye contact and sex appeal; twitchy Gary (Ryan Cartwright, *Bones*), an EM spectrum scanner with autism who's used, but not insensitively, as comic relief; FBI agent and resident strongman Bill (Malik Yoba, *Defying Gravity*), frequently concerned with his colleagues' deficiency in tactical skills or training; ex-CIA geek Rachel, whose hyper senses make her a walking CSI lab/urban tracker; and these are shepherded by powerless but nonetheless analytical Professor X-ish intellectual Dr Rosen (David Strathairn, *Whistleblower*, *Bourne* sequels, *Spyderwick Chronicles*). The unstable team is joined by ex-marine and telekinetic maestro Hicks (Warren Christie, *Apollo 18*) in a basic telefantasy scenario that avoids much familiar comic book lore, while it manages to suggest that superhuman evolutionary phenomena is linked to MK-Ultra experiments, and explores the variably sympa-

thetic characters as primary candidates for Rosen's briskly staged group therapy sessions, though the shrink's ideas of psych first aid has all the medicinal value of a tongue depressor.

As specialist consultants, Rosen's troubled alphas must face up to the morality of their own 'out of context' existence, a problematic situation Rosen insists should be viewed as 'us with them', never 'us versus them'. Meanwhile, in other decidedly non-academic spheres, the DCIS backed team are tasked with investigating/policing any emergent homo superior meta-humans with obvious criminal goals. Rosen's group confront not exactly a brotherhood of evil mutants but 'Red Flag' villains, including an OCD weirdo masterminding killings, a manipulated teen with mutant pheromones generating homicidal riots, and severely autistic 'femme fatale' Anna (Liane Balaban, *Rise of the Damned*), an effective universal translator and, by implication, ultimate code-breaker. Although they are usually clumsy when acting in concert, learning only by trial and error (what, no SF-author advisors?) about themselves or each other, and their kind, Rosen's A-team focus upon ethical issues while they cope with the paranoia of heavily politicised superiors. Rosen discovers that dealings with rogue alphas involve an organisation that's far more than just another criminal conspiracy:

it has become a secretive and yet widespread movement, enabling dangerous 'unsanctioned variables' of mercenary intent, as good for anybody's health as a home visit from unaccountably popular TV maniac Dexter.

Lindsay Wagner guest stars as the CDC expert in a small town epidemic story that is a cross-over episode with reference to TV series *Warehouse 13*. Summer Glau plays techno genius Skylar, armed with cyberpunk gadgetry, and her character looks terribly dated in SF terms but works perfectly as a comic book anti-heroine. *Star Trek* alumni Brent Spiner is cast as pro-mutant shockwave maker Dr Kern, in entertaining hostage thriller *Blind Spot*, featuring invisible girl Griffin (Rebecca Mader, from TV's *Lost*). *Unusual Suspects* sees the whole team captured for a MIB spook's traitor hunt, and the alphas' breakout from lockdown is inevitable before a scheming impostor in the group is revealed. *Original Sin* intros Rosen's runaway daughter Dani (Kathleen Munroe, *Survival of the Dead*), wielder of contact empathy, and chronicles the plot of an immortal alpha, prompting a showdown/shootout climax. All of the main cast require a few episodes to bring their strange characters to life, and they fail to cohere as a team until late in this debut season, but the production of *Alphas* makes the best of modest TV budgets and fearlessly takes a somewhat cerebral, often talky approach to what is usually action orientated material (see *Mutant X*, Paul McGuigan's *Push*), and does so without falling into the tar pits of soap opera that ruined Tim Kring's *Heroes*. A genre show without any vampires, werewolves, zombies or ghosts, *Alphas* is simply one of the best SyFy original series I have seen. Hopefully, its pseudoscience intrigues will continue to fascinate throughout a second season, broadcasting this year.



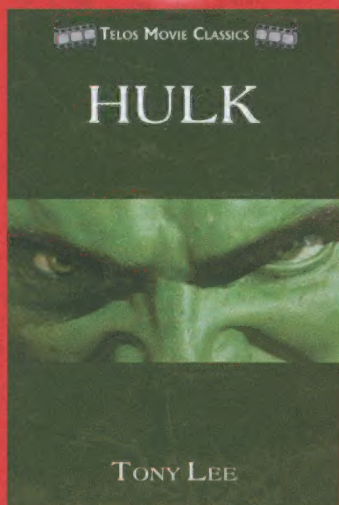
Having enjoyed *Clash of the Titans* (*Black Static* #18) remake I was looking forward to **WRATH OF THE TITANS** (DVD/Blu-ray, 15 October), and it's a welcome sequel that is not disappointing. It starts with betrayal, as Hades (Ralph Fiennes, far better than he was as a pantomime villain in the *Harry Potter* series) and Ares (Edgar Ramirez, star of Olivier Assayas' TV mini-series *Carlos*

the Jackal) become allies against Zeus (Liam Neeson). Perseus (Sam Worthington), now with realistic curly hair, gets a new sidekick in cousin Agenor (Toby Kebbell, *Prince of Persia*), our hero's guide through the labyrinth. Warrior queen Andromeda (Rosamund Pike, replacing Alexa Davalos) is a lot more than just the sacrificial cypher of *Clash*. Bill Nighy provides a fine comic turn as greybeard engineer Hephaestus, explaining with one throwaway quip how to seduce a mermaid ("Don't talk to her. Talk to her friend"). There are superb monsters. Perseus defeats a ferocious two-headed griffin, escapee demons from the Tartarus prison are on the rampage, attacks by a 50-foot Cyclops are marvelously impressive CGI action, but a beastly Minotaur is overcome rather too easily.

Better visual effects, and a rather grittier feel than that of the pre-

vious movie, add much needed atmospheric scenes to the episodic questing for parts of a spear and a journey into the volcanic pits of the underworld to battle the freed titan Kronos. Although director Jonathan Liebesman never bothers to pretend *Wrath* is much more than yet another father-and-son reconciliation tale, albeit one reaching for mythological scale, the powerful character portrayals by Neeson and Ramirez in particular can hold our interest with their gravitas amidst all the vivid fantasy fun. The grand finale is both a magnificently epic battlefield confrontation, and crazily surreal in its depiction of the loss of grace, as fallen gods must accept the ascent of a secular mankind. Overall, this is never as fascinating as Tarsem Singh's fabulous *Immortals*, but its war approaches the scope of Peter Jackson's *LOTR* trilogy without getting caught in the trap of excess sentimentality over victory greyed by grief.

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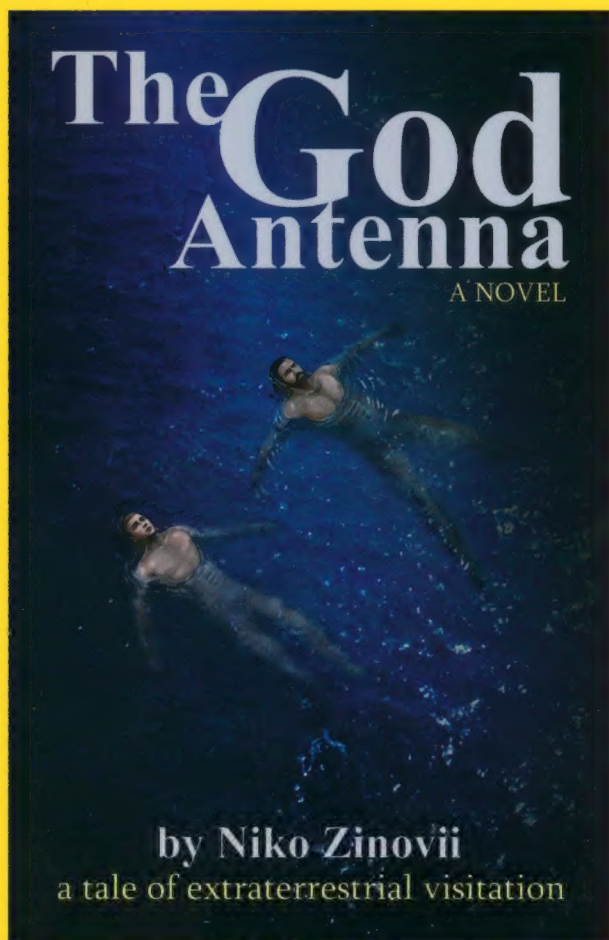
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